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life, mars and everything

NICHOLAS ROYLE

the heart of the matter

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

the misdirection

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CONTENTS

FICTION

6 HOLES
MARK MORRIS

18 THE LAST GREAT PALADIN OF IDLE CONCEIT
PAUL MELOY

35 SERPENT EGGS
DAVID LANGFORD

44 BALZAC'S WAR
JEFF VANDERMEER

FEATURES

4 EDITORIAL
SPECIAL OFFERS

14 NICHOLAS ROYLE: THE HEART OF THE MATTER
ROGER KEEN

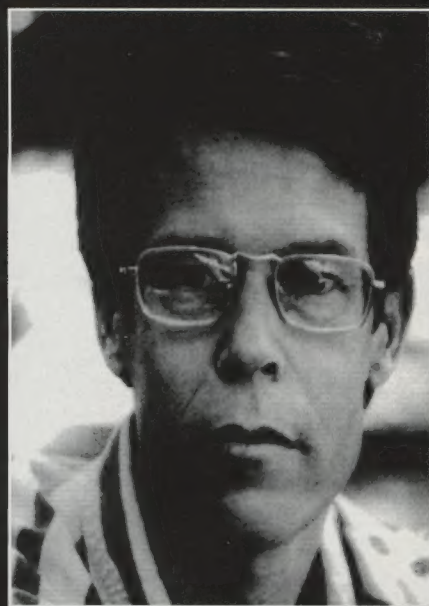
25 THE UNQUIET SOUL
RICK CADGER

26 CHRISTOPHER PRIEST: THE MISDIRECTION
GARY COUZENS

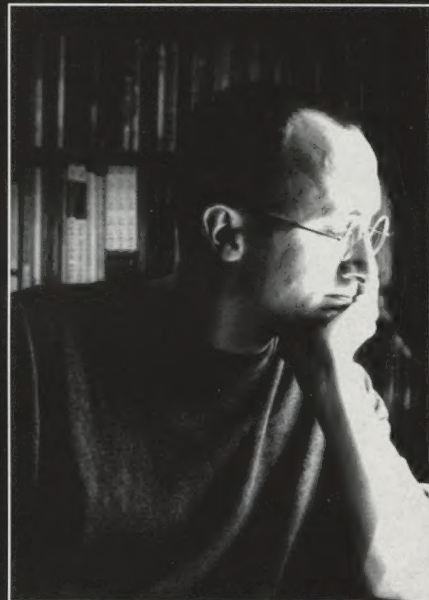
30 LETTERS

32 OVERDOSE
WAYNE EDWARDS

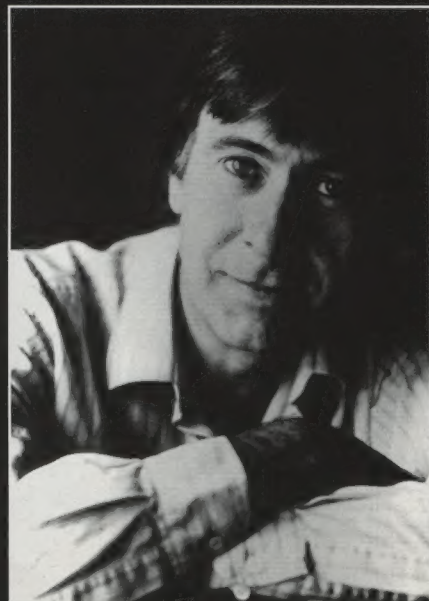
40 KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: LIFE, MARS & EVERYTHING
KV BAILEY



WHEN GIANTS ARE COMING DOWN THE BEANSTALK, WHAT HAPPENS?
MARS AND KIM STANLEY ROBINSON, PAGE 40



"IT WAS A DREAM AND YET IT WASN'T A DREAM"
NICHOLAS ROYLE INTERVIEWED, PAGE 14



"LITTLE FACTS THAT DON'T ADD UP, THAT MISDIRECT THE TRUTH"
CHRISTOPHER PRIEST PROFILED, PAGE 26

editorial

The Cosmic Scrapbook

Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the solar system, we are now able to offer you a completely new chapter of Allen Ashley's dazzlingly brilliant *The Planet Suite*, now reprinted to meet popular demand. 'The Cosmic Scrapbook' comes absolutely free with all new orders, and for those who already have the book it is available for a stamped (UK 31p; Europe/RoW 61p/2 IRCs), self-addressed C5 envelope.

If you have yet to sample the delights of *The Planet Suite*, here is a brief, diverting taster taken from the 'Bodily Mass' section of the brand new chapter:

'When I was four years old, I wouldn't venture out of the house during rain showers for fear of being knocked unconscious by plummeting canines and felines.

Much later, I was fascinated by the street hoarding claims, 'Ladies — Lose TEN POUNDS of unwanted fat in just two weeks'. My mother shook her head and muttered something paradoxical about no such thing as free lunches but my imagination began to run wild. The adverts themselves — for competing diets, lotions, clinical treatments and so forth — proliferated like a plague. Svelte champion slimmers were regularly seen on local bulletins and even children's news round-ups.

I remained puzzled. Where did all this superfluous stodge go? Dutch Uncle Nicholas, a since disgraced one-time family friend, regularly insisted that the amount of matter in the universe remains constant and, short of the synthesis of sustainable anti-matter, could not actually be destroyed.

His explanations were in fact less wordy and more suited to my developing mind, of course; the accompanying hand gestures were, however, deemed unacceptable.

It seemed clear to me that, what with gravity, magnetism and all that jazz, the whole glutinous mass of discarded globules would congregate either in clumps like oily asteroids or in some sort of greasy ring at the edge of our solar system. I was concerned that the more corpulence we let go, the more confined we were by an oleaginous barrier just beyond the orbit of Pluto. One day we might be completely enclosed within this greasy bubble, suffocated like insects in amber.

Adulthood has taught me differently. No matter that I walk to work and take regular exercise and do not spend every evening slumped in front of a TV or PC, I find my midriff widening and the stick limbs of youth turning inevitably to plumped-pillow roundness.

All those unwanted pounds of flesh rejected by all those thousands upon thousands of slimmers were not displaced spatially, but simply *in time*. Now they are returning with a vengeance.'

The Planet Suite continues to divide the critics. A brief mention in the latest issue of *Albedo One* calls it 'a load of old wankery', while the astute KV Bailey turns in a remarkably insightful, in-depth review for the BSFA's July/August *Vector*, which begins with the phrase 'innovatively imaginative' and just keeps on getting better.

Price Rise

Regrettably we must begin 1998 by raising the cover price of TTA from £2.75 to £3 (add 50p p&p for single copies by mail order), and the cost of a four-issue subscription from £10 to £11 (including p&p). This also affects the cost of a dual subscription with our sister magazine *Zene*, which will now cost £18. Overseas prices rise correspondingly. This is necessary

for all the usual reasons, but I hope you'll agree that these prices still represent excellent value for money. Existing subscribers may renew at the old rates at any time up to the publication of TTA15.

Don't forget to take advantage of the *extra* special offers listed opposite and, please, get your orders in early!

Congratulations

Seems like the list of regular TTA contributors to be found in the *Time Out Book of New Writing* (to be published by Quartet in 1998) is growing all the time. Jason Gould's story in TTA12, 'Double Negative', was apparently good enough to convince the editor to consider a further story which was subsequently bought for the anthology. Look out for more of Jason's stories in future issues of TTA.

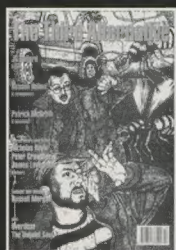
Another TTA contributor, Clifford Thurlow (author of 'The Healing' in TTA13) has sold the option to a movie called *Streets* to a London-based film company. The film is based on four of Clifford's short stories, took three months to write, nine months to rewrite and, eight drafts later, a 16-page contract was exchanged for a handsome cheque... Production is expected to commence in the spring, and throughout Clifford will be sharing his experiences with readers of *Zene*.

Mat Coward's slightly revised 'Clean and Bright' made for an enthralling fifteen minutes on Radio 4 recently. Mat has since sold three more typically offbeat stories to the afternoon short story slot, and thanks to him TTA has been encouraged by the BBC to supply them with several more stories.

Coming Soon

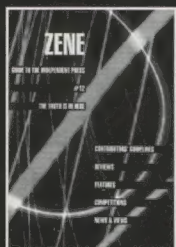
Watch out for Mike O'Driscoll, Conrad Williams, Isabel Allende, Kurt Vonnegut, Rhys Hughes, Storm Constantine, and a few very pleasant surprises... Be there!

special offers



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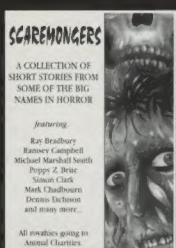
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Previous offers: **The Silver Web** and **Freezer Burn** sold out.

hand

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Submissions

Stories, artwork (samples, not originals) and ideas for non-fiction are welcome. Please study several issues of the magazine before submitting and always enclose return postage (overseas submissions should be disposable and accompanied by two International Reply Coupons). We are unable to reply otherwise. Always enclose a covering letter and send just one story at a time, mailed flat or folded no more than once. There is no restriction on length of stories but we are unlikely to serialise. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Submissions should be sent to the TTA Press address above

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I SUPPOSE EVE AND I HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER

for about two months when the first of the holes appeared.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly. The holes were initially regarded as little more than geological oddities, barely newsworthy. The first one opened up in a farmer's field in Missouri. It was sixteen feet wide, and so deep that all attempts to reach the bottom failed. The second appeared in Japan a week later, and then there was one in Europe — Denmark, in fact. They were of varying diameters, though shared the characteristic of being seemingly bottomless. But as I say, at first they were given little serious attention, used on news bulletins as amusing fillers to leaven the grim catalogue of war and famine and political corruption. I remember seeing some long-haired guy with intense eyes on daytime TV, ranting about the planet opening its mouth to scream its rage at the way mankind was raping it, or some such nonsense. I probably watched until the guy stopped being funny, and then switched off and went to make myself some coffee.

But all this is hindsight stuff. At the time I was far too preoccupied with Eve, with the way our relationship was developing. Nothing else mattered.

It was when the big London hole opened up that the entire thing started to go pear-shaped, but I'll come to that later. I'd better introduce myself. My name is Gerry Morgan, though everyone calls me Jez. I'm a professional photographer, and I've had what you might call a colourful history. Back in the seventies I was heavily involved in the punk scene. I roadied for The Clash, did a lot of coke, played bass in a band that released a single that sold about three copies, and generally had a wild time.

I'd always been interested in photographs since being a kid, and had a pretty good camera. I used to take photos at gigs, and sell them to the music papers, and that's how I got started. Because of my roadying, I was backstage a lot, and so managed to get plenty of interesting, unusual and candid shots of the bands relaxing, which always went down well. You must have seen the one of Dave Vanian eating a banana that was on the front cover of the NME in 1979? Oh well, never mind. It was a long time ago.

Eventually I branched out, got some commission work, and little by little became successful. These days I photograph anything and everything, depending on who's paying. I recently did some work for Pirelli tyres, and next

month I fly out to Vancouver to do some glamour stuff. I haven't abandoned the music scene altogether either. There's talk of doing a studio session with Elastica, but whether anything will come of that, I don't know.

The first time I saw Eve was on Hampstead Heath. It was Autumn, and I was doing some nature shots for my own amusement, close-ups of tree bark and dry leaves and wild flowers, trying different things to get different textures. It was a cold day, very early in the morning because I'd wanted to get some pictures of frost. I hadn't seen a soul for about twenty minutes, and was absorbed in setting up this shot of some pretty spectacular fungi that I'd found when I noticed a flash of red through the trees.

I looked up and there she was. I've taken hundreds of

shots of professional models, but none of them have ever taken my breath away the same as my first glimpse of Eve did. She was beautiful, or more than beautiful; I don't think a word exists that comes close to describing the way she looked. Forgetting all about the fungi, I turned and pointed my camera at her. A look of alarm, almost terror, crossed her face, and she put out a hand and shouted, "Hey, no! You can't do that!"

Surprised by her reaction, I lowered the camera and asked, "Why not?"

She looked flustered, but still beautiful. "I... I don't like having my picture taken, that's all. Besides, I don't even know who you are."

To describe her is to diminish her, because it wasn't just her dark, shiny hair, full lips, radiant complexion, startling green eyes and exquisite cheekbones that made her

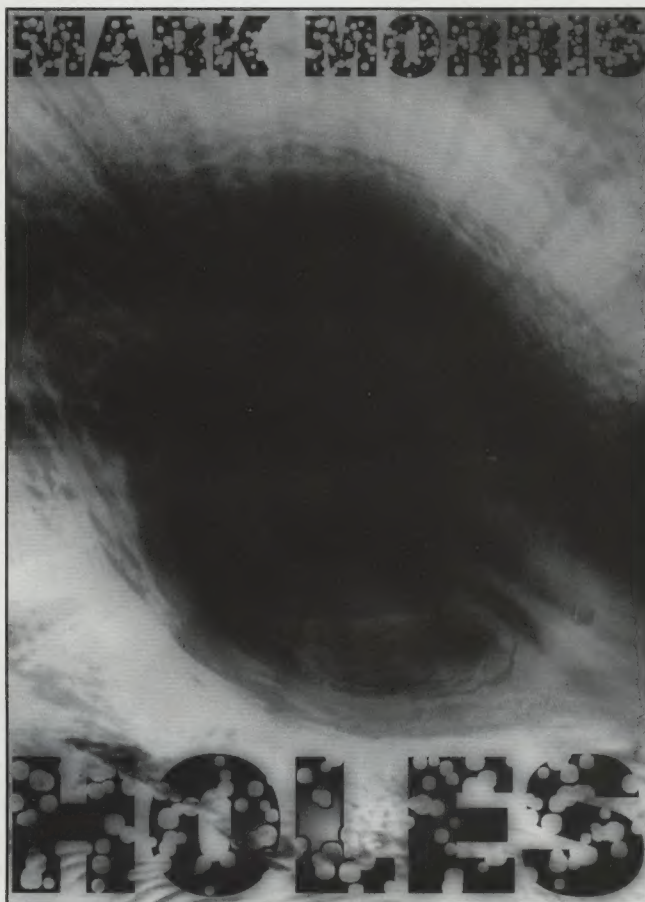
beautiful — it was something else, something indefinable, ethereal even. It was... I don't know, the way she held herself, the sensuous grace with which she moved, the way she seemed to glow with light and life. To be truthful, even that little lot falls well short of the mark, but hopefully it gives you at least some idea of what I'm trying to get at.

I introduced myself, and apologised, and then I asked her her name. I'm not usually so forward, but I was captivated by this woman; I simply couldn't let her walk away.

"Eve," she said, and immediately I thought: *perfect*. The first woman on Earth, the ultimate.

"It suits you," I told her.

She smiled and said, "Thank you," as if I'd paid her a great compliment.



Anyway, we got chatting, and I found myself offering to buy her breakfast. The instant I did so, I regretted the obviousness of the invitation. I fully expected her to pull her red coat protectively around herself and say, "Er... well... actually, I've got to be somewhere, like... now." I was, therefore, astonished, when she said, "That would be very nice, thank you."

There were two places on Highgate Road that I frequented. One was a poky greasy spoon, full of steam and crap music — the best of the New Seekers by the Reykjavik Male Voice Choir, Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells arranged for flugelhorn, that sort of thing — and the other was a more upmarket place, panelled in dark wood, with a cappuccino machine and a glass display cabinet containing plates piled high with croissants and Danish pastries.

This particular morning I had been planning to go to the former. The jumbo fried breakfasts were to die for (literally, I suspect, in some cases), and before Eve had shown up I'd been almost drooling at the prospect of crispy bacon and fried bread coated with a sunburst of egg yolk.

Now, though, I put such longings out of my head for the sake of propriety, and escorted her to the croissant place. To be honest, I didn't much mind. I'd have eaten ground glass just to spend another hour in her company.

Well, we got on great, which for me was another surprise. Eve looked the sort of girl who expected and received the best. It's a reflection of me, not of her, to say that I pictured her with some moneyed male model type, the kind of guy who owned a Porsche and took her to the best restaurants, who lavished her with wildly expensive gifts which he referred to as 'trinkets'. I'm never usually ashamed of myself, or the places I frequent, but I was that morning. Even the croissant place seemed like a dive with Eve in it. And I'm not exactly renowned for my inferiority complex — in fact, I've been labelled an arrogant bastard more than once — but with my big boots and leather jacket and hair that stuck up like straw because I'd dyed it too many times when I was younger, I felt like some pan-handler who'd followed her in off the street, hoping for loose change.

We ordered croissants and cappuccino, and set to. I expected her to nibble as though eating was a necessary evil, but she ate with gusto, devouring her two croissants before I did, and ordering more. "Mmm, delicious," she said, licking raspberry jam from her fingers. Watching her eat was a very sexy experience.

We talked about ourselves. She told me she came from Oxford, had lived in London just over six months, and worked as marketing manager in a building society.

"Really?" I said.

"Yes." She gave a puzzled frown. "Why are you so surprised?"

I shrugged. "I just thought you'd do something more... glamorous."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Model, air hostess, high-powered executive."

She giggled girlishly, and shook her head. Rather than detracting from the ethereality of her beauty, the gesture somehow enhanced it. Like the way she ate, it was something unexpected, and therefore delightful.

At eight-fifteen she announced she was going to have to go, otherwise she'd be late for work, and I remember now the wrench I felt at her words. It sounds pathetic, and I promise you I'm not usually like this, but I felt as though she was someone I loved who was emigrating to Australia, and who I was seeing off at the airport.

I asked if I could see her again. If she'd said no, I don't know what I would have done — followed her around, pleading with her until she said yes, probably. But she grinned as if I'd asked her the question she most wanted to hear, and she said yes immediately. We exchanged addresses and phone numbers, and I said I'd give her a ring in a day or two. I floated home, and spent the rest of the day thinking about her, feeling restless and sick and full of longing in a way I hadn't felt since the hormone explosion of my schooldays.

I had intended to play it cool, leave it a couple of days and then ring her to casually suggest a film and a meal. But I gave in and phoned her that very evening. She sounded genuinely pleased to hear from me, and readily agreed to everything I proposed. I arranged to meet her at 6pm on the corner of Tottenham Court Road on the Wednesday, and went to bed, unable to believe my luck.

Our second date was no letdown. Eve looked just as wonderful as she had two days before, and not once was there an embarrassing silence or a moment of awkwardness or misunderstanding, as can often happen on occasions like these. The evening went swimmingly, and Eve ended it by inviting me to dinner at her flat on Saturday evening.

In case you're starting to wonder, I'm not going to give you a blow-by-blow account of every date we ever went on, so don't worry. I do need to bring a few things to your attention, though, a few kind of... relevant episodes, I suppose you'd call them, which kind of acted as pointers to what came later.

The first of these happened when I went to Eve's place in Shepherd's Bush that first time. I'd dressed up for the occasion in my blue and white checked suit and stripy tie, and I arrived armed with a bunch of flowers so big they made my arms ache carrying them from the tube station. I also had a bottle of red that cost me more than I'd normally pay for a meal.

Eve answered my ring, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that I almost passed out when I saw her. She looked sensational; the most beautiful movie star in the world with very kind lighting could not have looked better. She'd put her hair up, and was wearing a low-cut, contour-hugging black dress, which showed off her wonderful throat and neck, the structure of her collar bone, and a tantalising glimpse of cleavage. I gaped at her. I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven. I would probably have stood there all evening, the flowers wilting slowly in my arms, if she hadn't invited me in.

She seemed nervous, more eager to please than on the previous occasions we'd met. Without wishing to sound cruel or condescending, that gave me a real buzz; it meant that she cared about the impression she was making on me.

She rhapsodized about the flowers, which I'd become increasingly worried during the walk from the tube station

were too ostentatious, and led me into the kitchen of her basement flat, where she looked for a big enough vase to hold them whilst I poured some wine from the bottle of red that was already open.

"Something smells incredible," I said, sitting down at the big wooden table that dominated the centre of the room.

Well, the meal *was* incredible, and afterwards, stuffed to the eyeballs, we retired to the sitting room with a bottle of wine. Eve stuck Portishead's *Dummy* on the CD player and we settled back, and just talked and talked. I'd never talked so much to a woman before, or perhaps even to *anyone* before. Looking back, I can't even remember what we spent all those hours talking *about*. Just stuff that was in our heads that you wouldn't normally think of sharing with someone, I suppose — hopes, dreams, fears, desires, thoughts, opinions. Too often in relationships I've been led by my dick, but despite — or, perhaps, because of — the fact that Eve was the most desirable woman I'd ever known, on this occasion it made me hold back, take things slowly. I didn't want to sour things with an ill-timed advance. I'd only known Eve a few days, but already she was becoming massively and inexplicably important to me.

That night we drank and talked until two in the morning, by which time I was blasted. "I'd better phone for a cab home," I said finally, reluctantly.

"How about spending the day together tomorrow?" Eve said. "We could drive out into the country, take a picnic."

"That would be wonderful. What time shall we meet?"

She looked a little embarrassed. "If you stayed here, we could get up, have some breakfast and go straight out," she said.

My stomach started doing cartwheels. I felt like I did when I'd been sixteen and had my first proper sexual encounter. But even now, a cool inner voice, belonging to a part of me that desperately wanted everything to be just right, was murmuring in my ear, *Now, don't jump to conclusions, Jez. And remember, you're sloshed. Do you really want your first time with this amazing woman to be a fumbling, awkward non-event?*

Unable to believe my own ears, I heard myself saying, "Okay, that's really nice of you. I'll sleep on the settee."

Eve offered me the bed, but although the prospect of sleeping between sheets that she'd inhabited was tempting, I valiantly refused. She fetched me a duvet and a pillow and said goodnight. The instant I closed my eyes, everything

started spinning sickeningly, and I was grateful I hadn't allowed the call of my gonads to get the better of me.

The next morning I had a slight headache, but I didn't feel as bad as I deserved to. I staggered into the bathroom, intending to have a wash and brush my hair, and perhaps even a shave if Eve had any disposable razors. I was running some water in the basin when it struck me that there was no mirror in the bathroom. Now, I'm not the sort of guy who can shave and brush his hair blind; I have to see what I'm doing. It was odd and a bit irritating, but I didn't think much more about it until Eve and I were eating breakfast together an hour later.

"You don't have a razor I can borrow, do you, Eve?" I asked. "Oh, and a mirror. I couldn't find one earlier."

Eve was wearing a long T-shirt and black leggings. Her feet were bare, and she was eating a bowl of Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes.

Between crunches, she said, "There are some disposable razors on the top shelf of the cabinet by the sink, and I think there's some shaving foam in there as well. I haven't got a mirror, though. You'll have to manage without."

"You haven't got a mirror anywhere in the flat?" I said, surprised.

She shook her head.

"But you must have one somewhere."

"Must I? Why?"

"Well, because...how do you put your make-up on, for one thing?"

"I don't need a mirror for that. I've been applying make-up for years. I could do it in my sleep."

"Well, what about when you're going out?" I said. "Don't you like to check before you leave, to make

sure you look okay?"

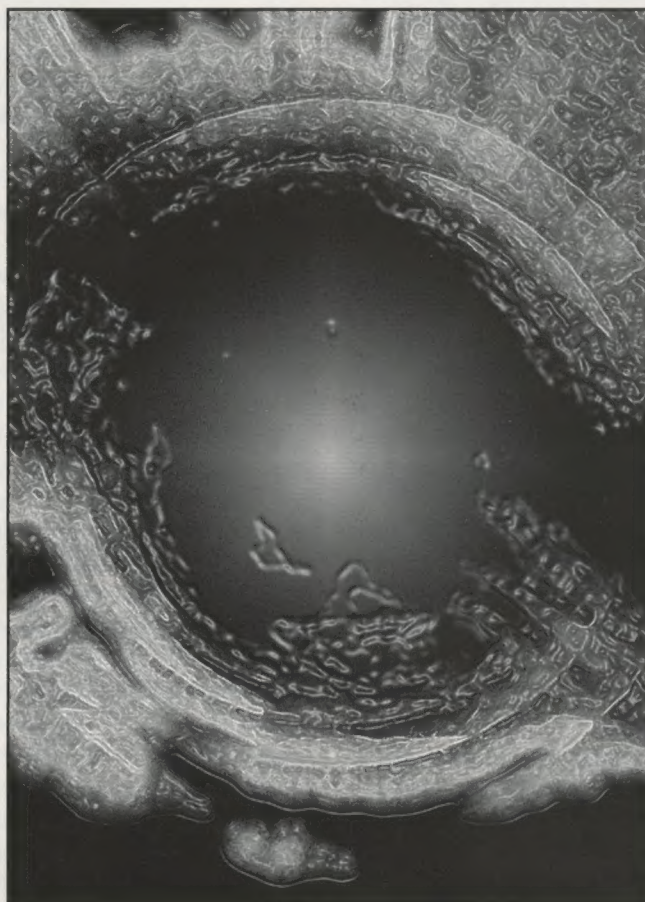
Eve shook her head as though it had never occurred to her. "I trust my judgement."

A little indignantly I said, "But don't you just like to look at yourself sometimes, to remind yourself who you are?"

"I know who I am," said Eve. "I don't need to look at myself."

"All right, to *admire* yourself then. If I was as...as beautiful as you, I'd want to look at myself all the time."

I was feeling flustered because I'd never come across such a lack of vanity before. And then I remembered the panic-stricken way Eve had stopped me taking a photograph of her a few days before, and a little alarm bell started ringing somewhere at the back of my brain. Everything had been going so well, like my idea of what a perfect



relationship should be, that it seemed inevitable Life would eventually turn round and give me a good kick in the teeth. Was this going to be it, then? The fly in the ointment? Was Eve's reluctance to view images of herself going to turn out to be the first of a whole glut of psychological problems?

For a few seconds a *Fatal Attraction*-like scenario pranced in my head, but then I remembered the hours we'd spent talking, the thoughts and opinions we'd shared, and I thought: *Nah. Surely not.* Eve seemed like one of the sanest, most together people I'd ever met. I was making too much of this lack of vanity thing. Either that, or it was nothing but a glitch, a minor hang-up. Hell, we all have them. I, for instance, find it impossible to take a piss in a public urinal, especially if there's someone standing next to me. My bladder just seizes up and nothing happens, no matter how badly I want to go.

I decided not to push the point for the time being, but I couldn't help testing her a little. Later that day, as we sat on damp grass beside a river, eating ham and salad rolls and drinking wine, I said, "You'll have to let me take some photographs of you soon."

Eve went on chewing for a moment, and then casually she said, "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because I'm a photographer, and I think you'd make a great subject. You're a beautiful woman, Eve. You knock spots off a lot of the professional models I've done shoots with."

In fact, she knocked spots off *all* of them, but I couldn't tell her that. Somehow it wouldn't have sounded sincere.

Eve finished all but a small piece of her sandwich. This she tossed into the river, where it was gobbled up by a duck the instant it touched the water.

"I don't know," she said. "We'll see."

"I could make you look amazing," I said. "I'm not talking fuzzy holiday snaps here, you know. I'm talking proper studio shots, with good equipment in controlled conditions. I'm sure my photos would lead on to other model work for you, if you wanted it. I really mean it."

She was still staring out over the river, her knees drawn up under her long skirt, her arms now wrapped around them. "I'm not interested in being a model," she said. "I think people who see outward appearances as being all-important are pretty shallow, don't you?"

I wasn't sure whether or not she was testing me. I said, "Well, the model thing was only a suggestion. I'd still like to take some photos of you, though."

"Why?"

"Well...for both our benefits. I'd quite like some good shots of you."

"To remember me by, you mean?"

I frowned. "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"You make it sound as though you're anticipating our friendship will end, and that we'll drift apart and never see each other again. Isn't that why photographs are useful? To remind us what people who we once knew looked like?"

"No, not at all. Photographs capture memories, times, events. They're a record for future generations."

"But why would two people who plan to stay together need a record? They've got each other, haven't they? Isn't that enough?"

Despite my frustration, I felt a thrill of delight at her words. Was she intimating that she saw the two of us staying together, or was she speaking hypothetically? Trying to keep a grasp of the discussion, I said, "But what about when one of them dies?"

"Then they've got their memories, haven't they? Memories are far stronger than pictures."

"But isn't it nice to have both?" I said. "Isn't it nice to be able to look at the face of the person you loved?"

"So what are you saying? That you take photographs of people because you know that one day they're going to die? Isn't that rather morbid?"

"No, I'm not saying that. You're twisting my words. I'm just saying that it's good to have a pictorial history of happy or momentous events. Humankind has always communicated through pictures. Pictures are stimulating and informative, and...oh, I don't know. How did we ever get on to this?"

Eve shrugged and tossed a pebble into the river. "I don't know," she said, and ended the conversation by standing up. "Let's walk."

I let the subject drop for the time being, but later I tried again. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

She raised her eyebrows. "That sounds ominous. Go on."

"Are you afraid of getting old?"

She looked at me quizzically, then shook her head. "I don't think so. Why?"

"Well, it's just...well, I wondered whether the reason you didn't like mirrors and photographs was because they reminded you of the passage of time."

She pulled a face as if to say *not this again*. This discussion, and our earlier ones, was the closest we'd come to a disagreement, and pursuing it gave me a hollow sort of feeling in the pit of my stomach. But at the same time I couldn't leave it alone. It was like a scab that I knew I had to pick, even though it would prove painful to do so.

"No," she said. "That's not it at all. It's just that I've never been a vain person. As a family we never really took photographs. We just enjoyed the present, seized the days that we had. And I've never been that obsessed with my physical appearance either. Okay, I wash myself, I buy clothes that I like, I brush my hair and I sometimes put on make-up. But once that's done, then I forget about how I look."

"What about last night?" I said. "The hair and the dress. You looked...stunning. You obviously went to a lot of trouble."

She actually blushed, which was a beautiful thing to see, and said shyly, "That was for your benefit. I thought you'd like it." I couldn't believe this. It was like some film: *Fantasy Woman*. Being the bastard I am, I took advantage of her statement. "The photos would be for my benefit too, or partly at least. Won't you consider it?"

She looked away, and didn't reply for a few seconds, and then she said, "I don't know. I wouldn't feel comfortable. I don't like posing."

"You wouldn't have to pose. You could be completely natural. You needn't feel uncomfortable with me."

I could tell she was uncomfortable *now*. She said again, "I don't know. We'll see. Please don't pressurise me."

"Okay," I said. "Sorry."

Anyway, things progressed. We started seeing each other more and more, and got closer and closer. In many ways it *was* like a dream relationship. Eve was everything I could ever wish for — beautiful, kind, funny, intelligent, warm, generous, patient, understanding. Think of any positive adjective and Eve was it.

She had to be patient and understanding, actually, because there's something I haven't told you about myself. When I was eighteen I got married. I went through two years of hell, and got divorced two years later. In the fifteen years since, whenever I've been in a relationship and things have threatened to get serious, I've backed off, thrown up the barriers. My marriage scarred me deeply, and every woman I've ever been with since has eventually had to bear the emotional brunt of that.

With Eve, though, it was different. I felt no pressure, no sense that the walls were closing in. Everything seemed *right*, and that was wonderful. Even the sex between us was everything I had hoped it would be. The only minor bone of contention — and it was minor because we never argued about it, merely discussed the matter — was this business of the photographs. Each time I brought up the subject, she said she wasn't ready or she was still thinking about it, or whatever. On one occasion I pointed my camera at her, like I'd done on Hampstead Heath. It was the only time I saw her get angry.

"Don't you dare, Jez!" she snapped, and she lunged forward and slapped her hand over the lens with such force that the camera banged back into my face, cutting me across the bridge of my nose.

Immediately she was contrite. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? Let me look." But she'd made her point. I never pointed the camera at her again.

No, I'm lying. What I should have said was, I never pointed it at her again *with her knowledge*. Because I did manage to take one photograph of her, and this is the one thing that I really regret. It was the only time that I betrayed her trust, and I've paid for it since, not only with my guilt, but with the nightmares which have made sleep a bad place to be for the better part of the last nine months. But I'm jumping ahead of myself again. First of all I have to tell you about the holes. Remember I said that the first one appeared when Eve and I had known each other for about two months? Okay, then we'll take it from there.

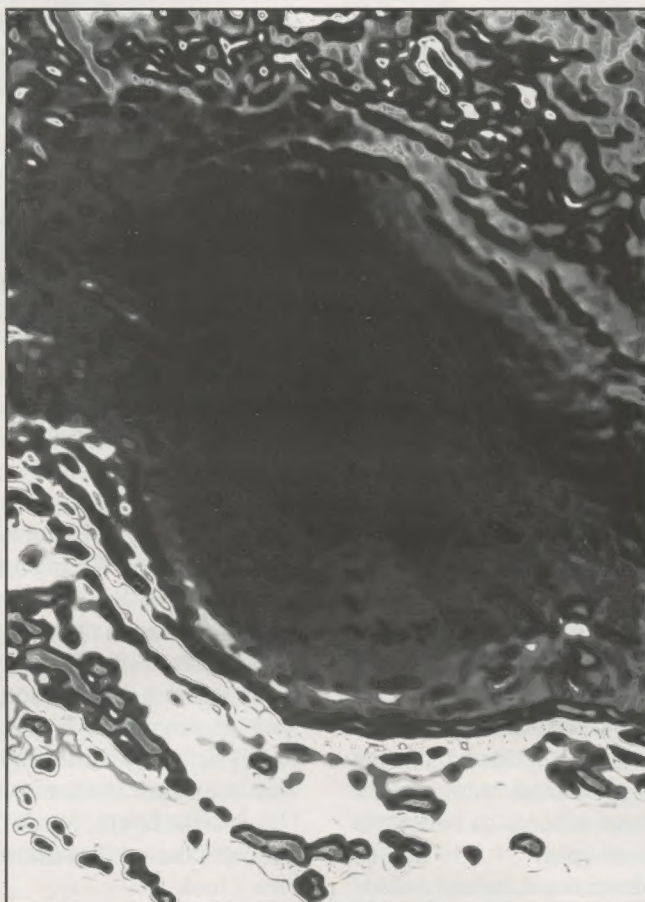
It took a few weeks for the story of the holes to gain momentum, but once it did nobody could talk about anything else. As I said before, I was so preoccupied with Eve that a lot of the early stuff passed me by. I don't tend to buy newspapers, and I don't see the news except accidentally, though I did have a vague inkling of what was going on because other people I came into contact with were talking about it, and I did see that guy on daytime TV rambling on about the earth being raped.

But what really brought the whole thing to my attention was when I went out to catch the tube one day a couple of months later and found that all the trains leading to central London had been cancelled. It turned out that a hole had opened up right in the middle of St Giles Circus overnight, a massive one, which as well as severing a number of tube

lines as easily as a spade chops an earthworm in half, had also swallowed a good portion of New Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. This was incredible in itself, but what was even more amazing was the fact that no one had witnessed the event. Okay, so it was estimated that the hole had opened up around four in the morning when perhaps the largest percentage of London's population is asleep, but even so, in a city this big, and in such a central location, there's always *someone* around — cab drivers, the homeless, insomniacs, night clubbers.

The thing was, by this time, dozens, perhaps hundreds of these holes had opened up in many different parts of the world, and thus far, no one, anywhere, had ever witnessed one of these things actually forming. I've now read up on the subject — it became an obsession with

me for a while — and I know that before the St Giles Circus hole, at least fifteen others had been reported in Britain alone. But the London one was the first time in this country that a hole had opened up right in the middle of a big city, and what was even more significant was that it turned out to be the biggest one so far in the world. It was about five hundred feet in diameter, and again so deep that the bottom couldn't be seen or reached. Because it was so big you could see a long way down it, but eventually the sides (which were eerily smooth, as though a massive hollow tube had been inserted into the world and a neat plug of rubble and concrete and earth removed) seemed to recede down to a point of inky darkness. I actually found a lot of this stuff out when I got home and saw it on the news. Eve had stayed overnight at my place, and when I let myself



into the flat the first thing I heard was the TV, turned up loud. I walked into the main room, which was also my bedroom, and saw a very strange thing indeed. Eve, oblivious to my presence, was sitting hunched up in front of the TV, her face no more than two feet from the screen. She was rocking gently, and she looked ashen. Her lips, which were almost grey, were murmuring what seemed like a mantra, though her voice was so low that I couldn't hear the words. I moved closer, and realised that she was saying, "Oh no, oh no," over and over again.

"Eve," I said, "are you all right?"

She whirled at my voice, her body jerking so violently that she made *me* jump. "Jez," she blurted, "what are you doing here?"

I nodded at the screen, which was showing an aerial view of the hole, people milling around it like ants. "The tube was closed because of that thing," I said, "so I came home."

"Oh," she said, "oh." She was making a massive effort to recover herself, to pretend everything was normal, but she looked dazed. She pushed herself awkwardly to her feet. Her hands were shaking. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"I'll make some in a minute," I told her. "I want to know what's upset you first."

"Upset me?" She tried to laugh off the idea, but failed miserably. "Nothing's upset me. I'm fine. You gave me a bit of a shock, that's all."

"Come on, Eve. You were upset before you saw me. Is it these holes that are worrying you for some reason?"

"Don't they worry you?" she said.

I shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it until today. They're very strange, certainly."

"Very strange," she repeated dully. "It's as if the whole world's crumbling."

"Is that what they're saying? Do they know what's causing them?"

She gave a humourless snort of laughter. "*They* have no idea what's causing them. No idea at all."

"You sound as though you do," I said. She remained silent, but looked away guiltily, as if she'd said too much. "You *do* know more than you're letting on, don't you?"

"Of course not," she replied, too quickly.

"Then why are you behaving like this?"

"I don't feel well. I need to lie down."

"Eve, we need to talk."

"Later. I really need to lie down for a bit first."

I sighed deeply. "Okay. But we are going to talk later. You're not going to get out of it."

"All right, all right," she said meekly. "Don't bully me."

"Do you want a cup of tea?" I asked her.

"Yes, please," she said, and then she held out her arms to me, a child demanding affection. "Hold me, Jez."

I crossed the short distance between us and held her. She clutched me tightly, as if I'd just saved her life. Her behaviour was odd and disturbing.

"I love you, Jez," she said. "I really do love you."

She'd told me that a few times. I liked it, but I can't deny that it also made me feel uncomfortable. My marriage had made me very wary of love, or at least of professing

it. I loved Eve, but I hadn't managed to bring myself to tell her yet. "I know," I whispered, "I know."

She broke away from me to look at my face, and for the first time she asked me outright the question I'd been dreading. "Do you love me too?"

I felt my throat closing up, a fist clench in my stomach, but she looked so desperate, and somehow lost, that I found myself nodding and at last I croaked, "Yes."

"Do you mean it?" she said.

"Yes."

"Say it then."

"What?"

"Tell me you love me, Jez. I need to hear you say it."

I cleared my throat, which now felt like a lock that had been rusted up for so many years that I had no idea whether this particular three-word key would be able to unlock it. I looked at her, cleared my throat again, opened my mouth, and suddenly the key was turning, my voice box grating into life.

"I love you," I said.

She sighed, and seemed to melt in my arms. That sounds very Mills-and-Boony, I know, but it was what it felt like. I held her for a few seconds longer, and then I said, "You lie down and I'll bring you that tea."

"All right," she said. She kissed me. Then she said, "And afterwards we'll talk, Jez. I promise I'll tell you everything. I love you so much."

She lay down on my bed and closed her eyes. The telly was on, still turned up loud, but she looked as if she'd fallen asleep immediately. I watched the news reports for a few minutes, but they were just saying the same things in lots of different ways, or wheeling in so-called experts to offer their own personal theories on the phenomenon, so I turned the TV off. I went into the kitchen to make two mugs of tea and came back a few minutes later.

"Eve," I said softly, "Eve, I've got your tea here."

There was no response. Eve hadn't even moved in the few minutes I'd been out of the room. I put the mug on the floor next to the bed, sat in the armchair, and silently sipped my own tea, staring into space and thinking. I glanced at Eve. In her sleep, she looked beautiful. The colour had come back into her cheeks, and her dark hair fanned out over the pillow. That was when I got the idea.

I sat for a few moments, thinking about it, feeling guilty but excited too. I could take a photograph of Eve now, in her sleep. She need never know. What harm could it do? I tried to ignore the voice berating me for planning to betray her trust, but in the end the idea was just too irresistible to ignore, and I jumped up and went to fetch my camera. I took one shot of her, just one, dry-mouthed with the fear that she'd wake up and catch me in the act. But she didn't; in fact, she didn't stir until hours later, when it was dark.

By this time I was riddled with guilt, which I had tried to assuage by telling myself that I needn't actually *develop* the photo if I continued to feel bad about it; I could always simply destroy the negative. When Eve finally raised her sleepy-eyed head from the pillow and spoke my name, I felt certain she was going to follow that with: "Why did you do it?"

"I'm here," I said softly, switching on lamps as I approached the bed. While Eve had been sleeping, I'd allowed gloom to fill the flat in deference to her.

She seemed confused by the darkness. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Just after seven," I told her. "You've been asleep nearly eight hours. Are you feeling okay?"

She sat bolt upright and her eyes opened wide. "Oh no," she said, ignoring my question. "Has anything happened?"

"Like what?"

"The hole? What's been happening at the hole?"

"The hole?" I repeated, frowning. "I don't know. What do you expect to happen?"

Eve almost fell off the bed and scrambled across the room to turn the TV on. There was some game show on BBC1. I caught a glimpse of Noel Edmonds in a horrible jumper laughing with a fat family before Eve started channel-hopping. She found what she was looking for on Channel Four. They'd extended the news because of the hole. A policeman in a peaked cap, standing in front of a high fence which had been erected around the hole, was saying, "...no evidence at this point to suggest that there's anything down there."

A news reporter, off-screen, said, "But a number of witnesses have reported seeing something moving in there. One man spoke of 'some sort of appendage or tentacle,' and another said he saw something 'big and humpbacked, like a whale'. What is your response to these sightings, Inspector?"

The policeman smirked. "I wouldn't call them sightings. I'd call them products of over-active imaginations."

"So you don't believe that there's some sort of animal down there?"

"No, I don't. How could there be? The idea's ridiculous."

"And what about the rumour that the walls of this hole contain smaller horizontal bore-holes as though something has been tunnelling its way out?"

"Again the idea's preposterous. I'm not saying that there aren't bore-holes, but it's believed that these are merely cracks radiating from the central shaft, and that they're due to the instability created when the hole first opened up."

"But it's true that smaller tunnels have been opening up throughout London, isn't it?"

"Yes, but again these are thought simply to be an after-effect of the main hole here."

"Does this mean that the very foundations of the city are being undermined?"

"No, no, not at all. It's simply—"

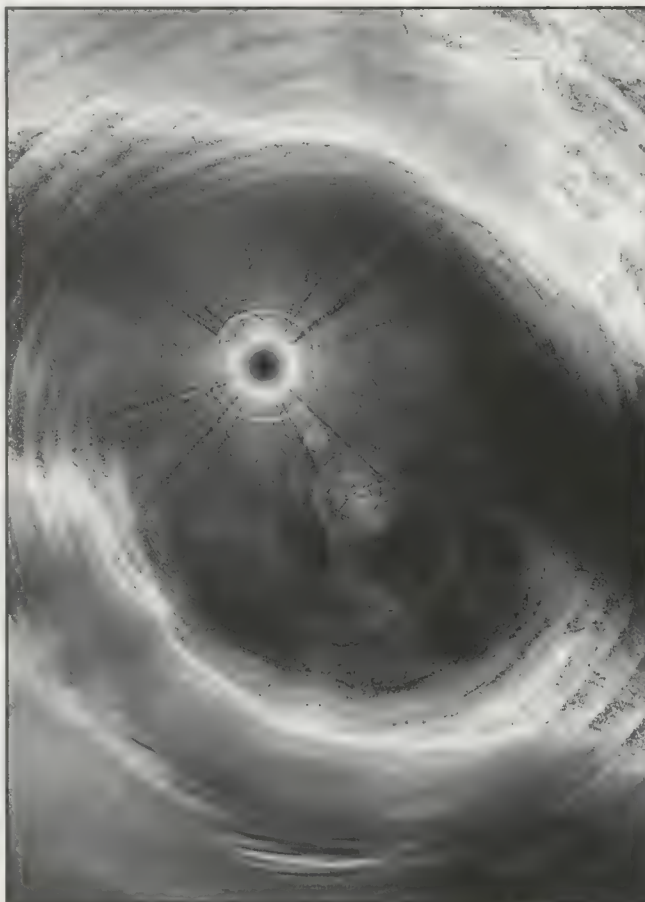
Eve switched the TV off. She looked utterly panic-stricken. She turned and stared at me for a moment and then she said, "They're coming for me, Jez. We haven't much time."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but something in her voice created a curl of dread in my gut. "Who's coming?" I said.

"You do love me, don't you?" she said. "Please tell me that you do."

It was easier this time. "Yes," I said, "of course I love you. Now will you please tell me what's wrong?"

"I have to leave you, Jez," she said. "I'm so sorry. I don't want to, but I have to."



She was scaring me badly. I knelt down beside her and grabbed her arms. "What do you mean you have to leave me? You have to go home, you mean?"

"No, I mean..." She saw the expression on my face, and she said, "I'm sorry, Jez. I'm so sorry."

"Will you please tell me what's going on?" I said, trying to control the panic I felt blooming inside me.

She hesitated a moment, then gave a sharp nod. "Yes," she said, "I'll tell you the truth. Though whether you'll believe me..."

"Just tell me."

"All right, all right."

She made me sit down, and then, pacing the room restlessly, she said, "You know I told you I came from Oxford?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was lying."

I blinked in surprise. "So... where do you come from?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm a...I suppose you'd call me a defector."

"A defector? From where?"

She looked at me strangely, and then hit me with an unexpected sideswipe of a question. "Do you believe in Heaven and Hell, Jez?"

For a moment I didn't answer, and then slowly I said, "What do you mean?"

"Do you believe that there's a good place, up there?" She pointed. "And a bad place, down there? And that when you die you go to one or the other, depending on how you've lived your life?"

I smiled nervously. "I don't know. I don't think so. Why?"

She took another huge breath. "Well, you should believe. Because it's true. Oh, it's not so black and white as it's made

out to be. There are a lot of grey areas, but basically these places, or rather dimensions, do exist." She held up a hand as I started to speak. "Please hear me out, Jez, otherwise we'll never get through this before they arrive. The thing is, I...well, I come from down there." She said this with some hesitation, smiling apologetically as she did so.

Despite her request for silence, I blurted, "Eve, what the hell are you talking about?"

The hand came up again. "I've caused a great deal of suffering in my time, but just recently I've come to question what I do. I've been on the horns of a moral dilemma, so to speak. So eventually I decided to defect, to seek spiritual asylum in the other place." She flipped a thumb skywards. "I made contact with...an agent. Her name's Meriel and she lives in Hackney. She said a portal could be opened up for me, but first I had to prove myself."

A car went by outside. Eve glanced nervously at the window. I was sitting there, stunned by the story she was telling me, not sure whether she was having me on or whether she was revealing that she really *was* barking mad, after all.

"My task was to fall in love with someone, and have them fall in love with me," she said. "And now I've achieved that task, I just have to wait for the portal to open up. But in the meantime, *they've* been looking for me. That's why all these holes have been appearing everywhere. And now it seems that they've found me, or at least that they have my scent."

She came to a halt, smiled nervously. "Pretty wild, huh?"

For a few moments I could only open and close my mouth like a goldfish. And then finally I managed to splutter, "So what are you telling me? That I was just an experiment?"

"No!" she said firmly. "Or at least...maybe at first, but not now. I never realised how...intense emotions could be, and how painful it would be to say goodbye. I suppose that was part of the lesson too." She reached out and touched my face tenderly. "I love you so much, Jez."

I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything, there was the roar of an engine and the squeal of tyres from outside. Panic crossed Eve's face and she flew to the window that looked down onto the road. I was beside her in an instant, and saw that a big black American car, the kind of thing that FBI agents drive, had slewed to a halt in front of the house, and all four doors were opening. Four men got out — black suits and overcoats, black shades, neat haircuts — and, without hesitation, ran up the path to the house. Next moment there was a crash from downstairs, followed by another, and another; they were trying to batter down the front door.

"Oh God, oh God," Eve said, as though appealing directly to the Big Guy, "what shall I do?"

My own thoughts were whirling. Whatever nonsense she had told me, I couldn't deny that there were some very frightening-looking people after her. "Lock yourself in the bathroom," I said, knowing how pathetic a suggestion it was. "I'll try to hold them off."

Eve looked at me helplessly, then ran for the bathroom. I heard the door slam and the bolt rattle into place. That'll give her an extra five seconds, I thought ruefully.

With an almighty crash, the door downstairs burst open. I ran into the hallway, and heard footsteps pounding up

the stairs towards my second-floor flat. The entire contents of my body slid into my bowels as my own door shuddered under the impact of what I could only assume was a flying kung-fu kick. With the second kick, the door crashed open, and suddenly terrifying men in black suits and shades were pouring into my flat.

"Where is she?" the one at the head of the group said, showing very white teeth. His voice was an accentless snarl.

I positioned myself in front of him, blocking his way. "She's not here. She went back to her own flat."

"He's lying," one of the other men said casually.

The one who had first spoken came towards me. I swung for him, but he caught my arm easily and shoved me backwards. I fell, sprawling.

"Search the place," he said.

The men stepped over me as I lay there. It took them no more than twenty seconds to deduce where Eve was hiding. They congregated outside the bathroom door whilst one of them kicked at the place where the bolt was. By this time I had risen shakily to my feet and was hovering, ignored and helpless, behind them, both wanting and dreading to see what they would do to Eve when they got her.

Three kicks, and the bathroom door flew open. The men stepped forward, and then recoiled, shielding their eyes. I did likewise.

The bathroom was full of an intensely brilliant light, which seemed to be pulsing like some vast heart. In the centre of the light stood Eve, or rather a kind of negative version of her. She was standing with her palms and her face upraised, as though enjoying the feel of rain on her skin after a long hot day. She looked utterly serene.

And then the light was gone, taking Eve with it. It was as though a crack had opened in reality, sucked in the light, and then sealed itself up again.

Suddenly there were just four men in black suits staggering around in front of me, and beyond them a splintered bathroom door, opening on to an empty bathroom. That was when I turned and ran — out of the flat, down the stairs, out the shattered front door, and into the night. The men didn't follow, and when I went back later — much later — they were gone. The only evidence that they had been there were the three wrecked doors.

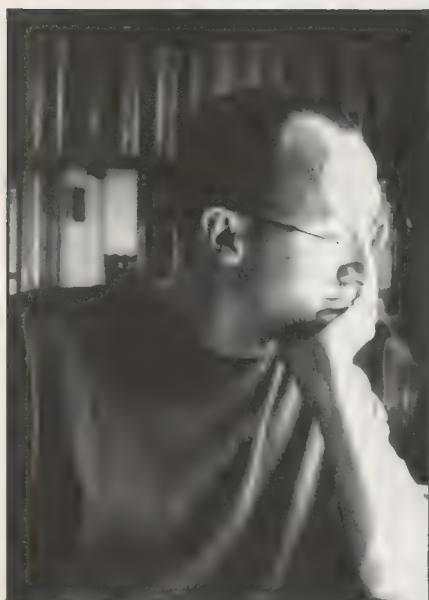
And that's about it. Soon afterwards, the holes started closing up, one after another, and again, astoundingly, there was not one person in the world to bear witness to how it was done. Over the ensuing months, scientific articles were written, numerous theories extrapolated, religious cults formed. But eventually the furore died down, and the world began to get back to normal.

But I didn't. I don't think I ever will. I'm still taking medication for my shredded nerves, and anticipate doing so for a long time yet. I might have been fine if I hadn't developed the photograph that I took of Eve on the last day we shared together. You see, the camera doesn't lie. It showed me what Eve *really* looked like. It is an image that will haunt me through the long, dark years ahead.

MARK MORRIS is the author of the novels *Toady*, *Stitch*, *The Immaculate*, *The Secret of Anatomy*, *Mr Bad Face* and *Longbarrow*. He is currently working on a new novel, provisionally entitled *Genesis*.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS ROYLE



Nicholas Royle is something of a renaissance man in the contemporary fantasy, horror and literary scenes. Over the past twelve years he has produced a fine body of short fiction, appearing in horror anthologies such as *Dark Terrors*, sf/fantasy magazines such as *Interzone*, literary magazines such as *Sunk Island Review*, and the more cutting edge-type publications such as BBR and, of course, TTA. He has had three novels published which, although they contain fantasy and gothic elements, have appeared under mainstream imprints — confirmation of the high esteem in which his work is held. He is also a small press publisher and anthologist, with the famous *Darklands* series to his name, and more recently the professionally published *Tiger Garden: A Book of Writers' Dreams* and *A Book of Two Halves* (football stories). Then there is the column for the British Fantasy Society news magazine *Prism*, reviewing for the *Independent*, the odd spot of author interviewing, guest editing and, incidentally, the full-time journalistic job at *Time Out*.

He gives the impression of enormous industry and dedication. One wonders how he manages to fit everything into a day. 'Generally what happens is I work on some of my own stuff in the morning, then I go into *Time Out* and do a day's work there, and ideally do some more in the evenings and more at weekends. I work much better under pressure; I actually get more of my own writing done when I'm busy. If I was to take a six-month sabbatical from *Time Out* it's possible that I wouldn't get as much done as if I carried on as normal.' So is Nick a fast worker, like his friend Kim Newman who can famously knock off a novel in ten days? The answer is somewhat surprising: 'It would be nice to be able to do that, but it usually takes me between two weeks and two months to do a short story. I just find it hard to concentrate intensively for the right periods of time, so I need as much time as possible. I'm far too easily distracted by the temptation of boiling a kettle or putting some music on.'

To connoisseurs of today's fantasy and horror the name Nicholas Royle brings to mind a distinctive, eerie kind of narrative, often surreal or reality-bending, often with a nightmare ambience to it. Talking about the development of his style and his influences, he mentions writers whom he likes — M John Harrison, Iain Sinclair, Steve Erickson — and filmmakers Nicolas Roeg, David Lynch, Peter Weir. His taste is for work which is close to his own: strong on atmosphere. 'I love to build up an atmosphere — it seems a vital part of writing. You can usually tell if it's working or if it isn't. And it's great when you're writing something and everything is falling into place, and you realise the kind of atmosphere you wanted to create is in fact being created. It's a good feeling.'

More than any other writer today Nick uses surrealism in a particularly striking and adroit way, adding to and enlarging his narrative rather than simply prettifying it. His images have a very visual and plastic quality, reminiscent of art as much as literature. 'I've been a fan of surrealist paintings since I was at school and first saw paintings by Dali and Magritte and Paul Delvaux, who's been my favourite for many years. I was seduced by it as soon as I encountered it, so if I can use the same kind of language in my writing then that's what I try to do.'

In some of Nick's work there's the feeling of a waking nightmare, an ambivalent state where dream and reality are confused, where it could be

Roger Keen

one or the other or some weird hybrid of the two. What does he draw on to achieve these effects? 'I had nightmares as a kid, but probably no more than anyone else. What often happens these days is that I confuse reality and fantasy to a certain degree, insofar as when I'm in my normal daily routine and something extraordinary happens I'll tend to think of the potential for story ideas. Even when it's something personally tragic I can't seem to stop that part of my brain thinking, "Gosh, what if...?" and getting things down on a mental notepad. If I've managed to put my own twist on that kind of experience then I'm pleased.'

Counterparts, Nick's first novel, could be looked upon as a kind of post-modern *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in that it's about the split personality and the whole phenomenon of division. But the narrative doesn't proceed in an obvious way, rather it is laid out like a puzzle, a cryptic crossword which the reader has to solve. Illustrations of splitting are everywhere in the book, from the Berlin Wall to a split penis — in some respects it resembles a mosaic or tapestry about splitting. 'A central question to the book was whether Berlin was one city cut into two halves, or was it two cities? And the two characters, Gargan and Midwinter: were they two quite distinct characters or were they two halves of the same personality? I wanted all that stuff to be going on, and for those ideas to resonate with all of the other imagery to do with division in the book... And as I worked on the book over a period of about a year it developed in lots of different ways I hadn't really anticipated. Any novel has to develop like that if it's going to sustain my interest. I love it when a book starts to do that — it almost generates its own head of steam, and it almost starts to mutate as you work on it.'

In his next novel, *Saxophone Dreams*, Nick entered the world of another artist, the painter Paul Delvaux, and used Delvaux's haunting dream landscapes and cityscapes for his own narrative purposes. The result is beautiful and poetic, another kind of hybridisation, but totally in keeping with the Royle ethos. When you view Delvaux and read Nick Royle it's easy to see how the two are on a similar wavelength. 'I spent so many years looking at his stuff. When I develop an enthusiasm for someone's work I tend to become quite determined about it — obsessive, some people would say — and I try to see *all* of their work, immerse myself in it. It was too tempting, given the depth of my interest in his work, to try to set some fiction in that world.'

Another big theme in *Saxophone Dreams* is jazz. Several of the characters are jazz musicians, and the narrative is partly driven by their attempts to get to play together. Like dreams and surrealism, jazz is a protean, improvisational medium, giving rise to surprising spontaneous effects. 'I just wanted to write about two things that I loved — surrealism and jazz — for what I *thought* were different reasons, and then when the book came out and I was doing some radio interviews for it, someone said that the two were actually quite close because of the improvisational element. I'd not really thought about all that, but I suppose it was there in my reasons for yoking these two apparently dissimilar subjects together...but it does make perfect sense in retrospect.'

There is a key short paragraph about half way through *Saxophone Dreams* which seems to sum up what the whole narrative is about, and indeed more general aspects of Nick's work. I read it back to him: *It wasn't a dream at all, but the laws it followed were those of the imagination, in which the world reinvented itself constantly. It was a dream and yet it wasn't a dream.* On hearing it he laughed a little. 'That might unkindly be termed having my cake and eating it...and that might be one reason why *Saxophone Dreams* didn't do as well as I'd hoped it would. Maybe I was trying to have my cake and eat it; maybe I was being a bit too ambitious, or hadn't thought it all through rigorously enough. And hearing that line read back to me it's difficult also to justify it — and yet there is something very tempting about that kind of contradiction. I like contradictions. I like paradox.'

The Matter of the Heart, Nick's new novel, is another ambitious, multilayered work. It is centred around the old St George's Hospital at Hyde

• Park Corner, through which Nick used to wander years ago, when it was
 • abandoned and derelict, before it was rebuilt as the Lanesborough Hotel. In
 • the book, a particular room in the hospital becomes a focus of evil,
 • spreading across time from the Victorian era, when surgeon George Maddox
 • performs the first ever heart transplant there, to more recent times when the
 • characters Danny and Charlie both suffer different misfortunes within its
 • four walls. In addition to these gothic elements, *The Matter of the Heart* is
 • rich in contemporary social observation, very good on the texture of London
 • life, and most humorous in parts too. It also contains two poignant narrative
 • strands — one happy, the other tragic — which correspond to real events
 • that have taken place in Nick's life recently: the narrator Chris falling in love
 • with cardiologist Joanna, and the account of his father's death from cancer.

• 'My father died on the 24th September 1994, and I started work on the
 • book on the 1st January 1995, and so for all the period I was working on the
 • book I was still grieving for my dad. When he was in hospital there were
 • certain things he said that were so sad, so poignant, or so upsetting, and I
 • mentally filed them away knowing, like I said earlier, that I was probably
 • going to use them one day...and now I have done. There are some writers
 • who pride themselves on the fact that everything's made up. Occasionally I
 • wish that I were one of those writers, but I'm not. I can't seem to help but
 • use things that happen to me. But that doesn't mean that the reader should
 • assume that everything is as it's portrayed. There's a fair amount of personal
 • experience and then I put this twist on it, I skew it slightly from what really
 • happened, because I'm doing something else: this isn't reality, it's fiction.'

• The novel contains a fair degree of medical know-how, and was intensely
 • researched. 'I got some help from the British Heart Foundation, I bought a
 • model of the human heart, and just as I immersed myself in Delvaux's work
 • for *Saxophone Dreams*, I immersed myself in the workings of the heart —
 • and hopefully not just literally.' For help with the details of the Victorian
 • heart transplant operation, Nick contacted medical historian Dr Peter
 • Fleming. 'I explained to him what I wanted to have happen, and it was his
 • job to say whether it was completely outlandish or just a little bit
 • outlandish.' In the book surgeon George Maddox uses another person to act
 • as a heart-lung machine during the operation. Could that be done? 'It would
 • be feasible. You'd put a lot of strain on them, but the operation as described
 • in that historical sequence could actually work.'

• The word 'heart' has many meanings and connotations, and Nick makes
 • great play of this rich texture of associations, so that parts of the narrative
 • symbolically reflect other parts, and all sorts of metaphorical spin-offs take
 • place. 'That's what I love about writing, and especially in a novel, where
 • you have more space to do that kind of thing. I suppose it's like what I was
 • doing in *Counterparts* with ideas of division and multiplication, splitting and
 • doubling... I wanted to write about the heart in all its glory and all its

NICHOLAS ROYLE IN HIS STUDY



different aspects. Some people believe it to be the receptacle of the soul — I don't know what my own beliefs are as far as things like that are concerned, but I'm certainly interested in all the ideas. I also wanted to write about this hospital, and a room at the heart of it being the very heart of London.'

Pattern-making and the interweaving of symbols figure prominently throughout Nick's work. The short story 'Night Shift Sister' from the *In Dreams* anthology is constructed around the spiral motif, which manifests within the grooves of a record, a cooker ring, a car cigarette lighter, an arrangement of London streets, and so on. In *The Matter of the Heart* he uses other symbols (in addition to heart-related ones) such as the figure-of-eight design of Mercedes 280SE headlamps, and is reflected in the shape of a venomous snake which Chris and Joanna encounter in the Australian outback. All this adds up to another level of storytelling, a non-linear one, more like in art than literature. 'I'm delighted that you've seen that because it's one of the things I like most about writing: getting that depth of symbolic resonance. Without that layer of resonance I wouldn't be enjoying writing as much, and I wouldn't expect people to enjoy reading it as much.'

Apart from his own writing activities, Nick is probably best known as the editor/publisher of the renowned *Darklands* series of horror story anthologies, for which he set up the Egerton Press in order to publish after every feasible professional publisher turned it down. He went to enormous trouble to get other writers into print, and so gained a reputation as a champion of a particular kind of more cutting-edge material. 'It gives me a certain satisfaction to publish other people. I love anthologies of stories, and it gives me a certain satisfaction just to add to the number of anthologies in existence. I decided *Darklands* was worth doing even if I had to finance it all myself, which I did when this deal we had with a publisher fell through.'

Darklands 1 did prove to be successful, gaining good reviews in the quality press and winning the British Fantasy Society Award for 'Best Anthology'. The crowning glory came when New English Library, one of the publishers who'd originally turned it down, reconsidered and issued it as a mass market reprint. 'I was slightly pleased to have been proved right, but mainly I was glad for all the people who'd contributed, because it was a little bit of glory for them.'

Through some fitting karmic justice Nick himself benefited from a rerun of this same process. When *Counterparts* failed to find a professional publisher it was picked up by Chris Kenworthy's Barrington Books, and subsequently reprinted by Penguin as part of a two-book deal with *Saxophone Dreams*. 'I'd tried about fifteen publishers with *Counterparts* and even though some of them were very complimentary they'd all turned it down. I was trying to sell it as a mainstream novel, and then because of my background in horror stories, and because of some of the book's content, people began to say that perhaps I should try to sell it as a horror novel. So I tried that as well but it didn't work with either set of publishers or editors. In the end Chris Kenworthy offered to publish it. I don't know whether I'd be where I am today, wherever that is, if it wasn't for him.'

As he is one of the most highly regarded exponents of short fiction on today's scene, it seems strange that we have yet to see a story collection from Nick Royle. He talks of a deal with White Wolf in America which has just fallen through, and of the general disinterest in short story collections among publishers, but now that he has signed up with new publisher Abacus for *The Matter of the Heart* the prospects look more hopeful.

'Ideally what I'd like to do is have two collections published at the same time, one with Abacus and one with Warner, both of which are parts of Little, Brown. Abacus could do my collection of mainstream stories, and Warner could do a collection that is going to appear in America, which is much more obviously a collection of horror stories. But there wouldn't be that much distinction between the two collections because I'm always trying to walk that tightrope and appeal to both camps at the same time. I just hope I can continue to get away with it!'

THE MATTER OF THE HEART

Nicholas Royle

Abacus paperback original, 305pp
£9.99*

The Matter of the Heart combines the stories of a Victorian pioneering surgeon whose experiments in early heart surgery end in gothic madness, Charlie whose sexual antics in a hotel bedroom lead to a massive coronary and the illusive unknowable Danny, who like Nicholas Royle himself, used to sneak into the old abandoned St George's hospital in the days before it became the Lanesborough Hotel. Inextricably linked by geographical point, these three incidents enfold a group of acquaintances, and apparent coincidence has a devastating effect upon the blossoming romance between Chris and Joanna, a beautiful cardiologist.

'Royle's dream-tracks honour territory previously mapped by such masters as JG Ballard and M John Harrison. He sustains his metaphor with heart-stopping guile'

Iain Sinclair

'Nicholas Royle combines dreamtime with A-Z. Every back street, every corner in the rain, every corridor of an abandoned hospital has his sign on it, hacked into the tangled urban undergrowth with the machete of real talent'

M John Harrison

*Turn to page 5 for our *extra*-special offer on this outstanding new novel.

A black and white portrait of Paul Meloy, a man with a shaved head and a slight smile, looking towards the right. He is holding a microphone in his right hand. The background is dark.

Paul Meloy

**The Last Great
Paladin of Idle Conceit**

LENNY BRUCE DIED THE YEAR I WAS BORN.

A week ago I woke up in the middle of the night and there he was, in the moon-shadowed corner of my bedsit pissing in my sink.

"Are you pissing in my sink?" I asked him, because I assumed I was dreaming and because that was how his gag went.

He turned to look at me. It was Lenny Bruce for sure: those laconic eyes, half lidded and dark, bulging with eager fallenness; hair short and slick, styled in a long gone sixties chic; wide, wisecracking grin at the bottom of his oddly handsome, tumbler-shaped face; and that mole to the side of his mouth.

He zipped up. "I just don't think I'm ready to go back into the john just yet, my friend," he said.

He came over and sat on the edge of my bed. I was surprised and a little disorientated by the full weight of him, and I shifted further up against the headboard, totally unprepared for the way the mattress sank beneath him, rolling my hips against his suit-trousered thigh.

Lenny Bruce sat forward and looked me in the eye. "Who're you, jim?"

"Eddie," I said, quiet and suddenly breathless at the way this dream had blossomed with alarming sensation. "Eddie D'Andrea."

"You gotta help me, Ed."

He got up and strode over to the window and looked out over London through the grimy nets. Distractedly, he rubbed his palm across his lips then ran it down his arm to cup his elbow, which he massaged, thumb pressing into the soft flesh and tendons of the joint.

I took a quick look at Allie, deep in sleep beside me. She lay on her side facing the wall, her breath huffing softly.

Then I looked back over at Lenny.

When he spoke it was in a hush so full of longing, debilitating hope it sounded like a man haunted by a lifetime of unanswered prayer.

"You've gotta help me," he said. "I gotta have one more chance."

I TOLD ALLIE ABOUT MY DREAM THE

following morning as she was getting ready for work.

She shrugged her jacket on over a crisp silk blouse and loosely wound a gaudy paisley scarf around her neck.

"Strange, Eddie. Even by your standards," she said. "I never have dreams about anything exciting." She used both hands to pull her splendid ash blonde hair into a pony tail, which she tethered with a purple scrunchie.

"It was so real," I said for about the fifth time. "But sad, you know, like really moving. Most vivid dream I've ever had. You know, I even got up this morning and checked the sink for urine stains." I laughed, a little embarrassed because it was the truth: it was the first thing I'd done when I'd got up.

"You're pretty bizarre, Eddie." Allie frowned as she stepped into her shoes.

I went over to her and gave her a hug, toppling her back into my arms. One of her shoes hung from her toes in an incredibly sexy way. I kissed her mouth. I felt the silken glide of her stockinged calf against my bare leg.

"Mmm. Bizarre and apparently very horny. I gotta go to work."

I let her go with major reluctance. She prised my hands from her backside.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Like a million lira," I said and got a prod in the ribs. "No, really lovely I meant. Scarf's a bit iffy, but you'll do."

"God! You really know how to treat a lass."

"Treat 'em mean, me. I'll rough you up a bit later if you want, if you're not too busy."

"I'll have had enough pawing when I'm done having lunch with Kimpton, so you can just put that idea out of your mind, matey boy."

I groaned. "That lusty, inappropriate old bastard took the lie out of client and replaced it with little you."

Allie made an exasperated sound and spread her arms. Her small breasts leapt heartily beneath her blouse.

"Oh, Eddie, he *loves* me. He eats out of my hand."

"Well, I hope that's all he eats out of."

"Eddie!"

I grinned and went for another kiss.

"Right, now I gotta go. Later." Allie opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

"Watch out for Kimpy."

"I'll wear a shark cage. Luv ya!"

And she was gone in a swirl of Coco Chanel and bouncing blonde hair.

I WAS FILLING THE KETTLE WHEN I HEARD A

light tap on the door. *Forgotten her key*, I thought, and went to let Allie in.

"Morning, Ed," said Lenny.

He was leaning against the wall opposite my bedsit, half his face in shadow, the other half dimly lit by the watery daylight that slanted in through the small window set in the stairwell. He stepped out of the shadow and I saw the latent urgency in his eyes, still there from last night. I gasped and found my hands covering my mouth in a cartoonish approximation of 'act shocked'.

"No dream, Eddie." He laughed. "You wouldn't dream this suit twice now, would ya? Think about it."

I just stood there looking at him. Dressed in his mid-sixties clothes and shiny shoes, like James Dean, an icon forever preserved in a definite fashion, a style that the following decades could not distort or make ridiculous.

I did what I might have done for anyone else. I stepped back to let him come past me into the flat.

He was shorter than me by at least six inches and I could see the light shining on his oiled hair in silvery bands. He went straight over to the window again.

"London!" he said loudly. "I can see you, you tricky bitch!"

What did I think? What *do* you think when one of the world's most radical comedians turns up on your doorstep, dead some thirty years, smelling of hair oil and calling you Ed like he's known you forever? Personally, I was thinking: *what the fuck?* But we may differ.

I watched him carefully as I dressed, saw him pace back and forth in front of the window, occasionally leaning on the sill to peer down at the street, then glaring off into the distance taking in the landmarks and listing them to himself in loud proofs of his observation.

When I was dressed it seemed right to offer him something to eat so I suggested I make him some breakfast.

"Ed, let's eat out." He was at the door and holding my jacket. "You got any dough?"

LENNY BRUCE DIED THE YEAR I WAS BORN. 1966, in a bathroom, from a heroin overdose. You can see the forensic photograph of this on the back of Goldman's biography, evidence of a greater affront to taste and decency than anything Lenny was ever accused of in his life.

He became known, inaccurately, as the 'sick comedian', inaccurate because, like a finely ground mirror, he reflected back nothing but the sickness he perceived beneath the surface of his society. In his day he delivered it up undiluted and impossible for some to bear.

When Lenny said 'cancer' people walked out. When he said 'cocksucker' he got arrested and tried for obscenity. They all missed the point; he didn't talk about tits and ass to incite prurient thought, he was talking about tits and ass because nobody else was.

We sat in a cafe in Denmark Street and ordered coffee and bacon rolls. Nobody was paying us much attention, so I assumed that my companion went unrecognised. I was still overwhelmed by the feeling that someone was sure to walk in at any moment and point and say: *My God, that's Lenny Bruce! He's dead!* It was possible, but probably unlikely. Lenny had never been particularly well known over here and what black and white television archive there was of him was rare and late on, when he was rambling.

People definitely saw him though, which helped assuage my tentative self diagnosis of incipient schizophrenia, especially the waitress who had stood and held his gaze while she took our order, her pretty brown eyes looking straight into his as she scribbled on her pad. He had given her an easy smile and gazed after her as she went off with the order.

"Nice tuchis," he informed me once she had gone.

"Yeah," I said absently. "Lenny, could you please tell me what I'm doing here, having breakfast with a dead comic, because the shock's going to wear off soon and then you'll have lost me."

Lenny looked me in the eye. "No doubt you are playing host to a wide range of emotions, Ed. Let me put you on the level. I'm back because things ain't funny any more. I'm back because I should never have been gone to begin with. And I'm back because bad things have begun to happen and they're going to get a lot worse." He took a

bite from his bacon roll and chewed slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You're going to explain all that, right?"

"Look, let's crack it wide open. You're a comedian yourself, Ed, you gotta understand this."

"Have you heard my stuff? I've done supports and warm ups for TV shows. That's about as good as it's going to get. I'm under no illusions, I'm not that good. My agent nearly hired one of my hecklers."

"No, no, but you've heard *my* stuff. You know my work. You know what I do best and that's all I need."

This was true. I was a second rate warm up man. I was never going to play the big rooms, as Lenny might have said, but I did know my history. I knew all about the greats, and I considered Lenny to be one of the greatest.

"When I was doing my stuff," he continued, "I was taking chances. I was on the fuckin' edge, man. All the time there were people walking out on me there were clear lines of demarcation, so it was: *fuck them*. They thought they were decent, they thought I was sick." He picked up his teaspoon and hit the top of the saltcellar. "*To* is a preposition," he hit the side of the sugar bowl, "*come* is a verb."

His expression was now openly challenging.

"To come..." He tapped the salt pot and sugar bowl again, building up a rhythm. He added his coffee mug to the repertoire. "Didja come? Didja come good? Didja come? Didja come good?" He laughed and the people sitting round us began to stare a little.

"Lenny, man—"

"Don't come in me! Don't come in me! Don't come in me min me min me min me!" he sing-songed.

The waitress came over. "Everything all right?" she asked wearily.

Lenny smacked the spoon down on his empty plate. "I can't come!"

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS ALL THAT ABOUT?" I SAID angrily once I had mollified the waitress with a further order for coffee.

"Were you shocked?" Lenny asked innocently.

I shook my head. "I don't think she was too amused."

He sat back in his chair and hooked an arm over the backrest. "You know I never got to play in England."

"Yeah. You were deported before you even got off the plane."

"That's it. My reputation preceded me. I was fuckin' hounded to death. Heat wouldn't leave me alone. The world got rid of Lenny Bruce and now he's back and you're gonna help me play here and put things right."

"Oh, right. I'll just give my agent a call and see if he can book you in for a slot at the Comedy Club. Lenny Bruce live and fucking undead!"

"No, no, Ed, you're not digging me. If I don't play here, if I don't fulfil my destiny, things are going to get crazy. Let me give it all to you."

He sat up and surprised me by taking hold of my hands. They were cool and oddly delicate.

"When I was around, there were taboos to break. I had my pick of them. But I didn't do it because it was easy. It

wasn't. Then it was the hardest place to be. Now look, thirty years later, anything goes. How could things have changed so fast? You can get up on stage now and shit in your pants and you'll get big laughs. I used to get cops at my gigs just to ensure I didn't say anything unconstitutional. Now..." He looked into my eyes, searching with that jagged urgency dancing just behind his. I was slightly alarmed to see them filling with tears. "Now there's nothing left to make people uncomfortable." He released me and smacked his palms flat on the formica table top. "The new fuckin' rock and roll! Look at the audiences, Ed, look at 'em trying to crack up at stuff that just ain't funny. How'd it get like this? I *died* for my stuff. I gave my fuckin' life for it!"

Horribly, he had begun to cry. Huge tears ran down his cheeks.

He was right in many ways. Some years ago I had read his biography, a surprisingly fair and compassionate study by Albert Goldman, probably the biggest pop biographer of his time and a man not renowned for prettying things up. But it was impossible, especially if you were in the business, however small-time you were, not to get a sense of Lenny's struggle to represent something, to get something across that would truly shock us at a level fundamental enough to open our minds and face stuff we were afraid of. To Lenny, that's what his art was.

Lenny had pulled himself together. "Sorry, Ed, but I can't take this. In thirty years it's got so nothing matters any more. Don't you see? They thought I was sick but I wasn't. I was keeping it fresh in their minds. Without that, things start to fly apart. Haven't you begun to notice?"

"Lenny, it isn't all bad. There are some great comics out there. Great observers. Bill Hicks. Henry Rollins. Real power."

Lenny looked at me with an expression of deep concern.

"Hicks is dead, man, case you haven't noticed. And Rollins was this close to getting it he's never going to come to terms with it." He leaned forward. "There's something out there, Ed, and it wants us shut up. That's why I'm back. If I don't do what I was stopped doing thirty years ago everything's gonna blow wide apart."

"You think you were stopped from playing here by something other than convention, Lenny? You've gone way past me."

"Look. If you lose the edge, you're numb. That's what's happening. If I'd played here — Lenny Bruce at the fuckin' Palladium — I could've kept things together. When that got out of whack, it had won. It got rid of me. You're gonna think I'm an asshole, but I was one of the last great paladins of idle conceit. And don't go grinnin' at me like that, I didn't come up with that one. There were others before me and there have been some since, but none of them as powerful or focused. They're being taken out, man, and what's taking their place is comedy promulgating feeble, popularised, *inelegant* crap. It won the moment I ended up in repose on the floor of my crapper."

"What won? For fuck's sake."

Lenny ignored me.

"It filled up the next thirty years with a lot of unimportant shouting and a lot of cussing and what people thought

was ground-breaking obscenity. You know what the truly obscene is, Ed? It's shouting 'fuck' and getting a laugh. It's standing there on stage with your dick out despising the audience by giving them stupid nitwit crap, despising them by *expecting* to be laughed at simply because they don't know what's funny any more, and despising them by knowing it. And now here we are with nothing left to brace ourselves against, nothing left to draw gasps from us and show us what we are, nothing to stop it all coming apart. Look."

I turned as the door crashed open.

A young woman wearing jeans and a tight white sweater burst in and let out the most wretched scream; wretched because within it, and upon her face, all the articulations of every worst nightmare were apparent.

Her arm shot out and the bundle of woollen blankets she was carrying flew apart, sending their contents spilling to the floor.

"Oh God," I said as what lay between the chair legs reached out tiny hands.

There were squashed chips and peas on the floor around its head. Beyond the mother, who was standing shuddering with horror, both rows of teeth showing in a frightful, disgusted sneer, a woman had paused in passing and was peering in, her fists full of shopping bags.

One of the waitresses had gone to comfort the mother while another — our bright-eyed lass, in fact — bent down between the tables and chairs and scooped up the mewling bundle. She cooed and fussed, looking into the little mite's face and smoothing its fine blond hair with her hand.

Together, they walked the trembling woman to the back of the cafe and sat her down behind the counter. When the child was offered back to her, she cringed and held her hands up as if to ward it off. Further ministrations from the girls eventually persuaded her to resume contact with the child, but she held it with terrible care, exploring its face with her panicked eyes, her breathing rapid and shallow.

"Come on, Ed, let's split." Lenny was up and out the door, looking back at me, still sitting with a mug of coffee frozen halfway to my lips, wondering what the hell was going on.

WE MADE OUR WAY BACK TO MY FLAT, THE streets smelling of that curious and repellent blend of diesel and sick particular to the West End at most times of the day.

"You ever heard of Norville Laughton, Eddie?" Lenny asked me as we walked.

"Huh? Rings a bell," I said, still so deeply disturbed by what I'd seen in the cafe that I had been walking in reflective silence for the past five minutes.

"I've got quite a bit more to tell you, Ed, so listen up. Norville Laughton was a small time player in the silent movies. Played a Keystone Kop coupla times, extraed in some of Keaton's later films, even made it into one or two of the Laurel and Hardy talkies. His greatest moment was in a gorilla suit. Remember that one?" He threw back his head and pealed a great whoop of delight. I was beginning to smile myself, a little at the memory of that

great hairy brute lumping around in a tutu, but more so because it was Lenny Bruce himself, out on the streets of London at last, howling with great good humour in the late morning sunshine, who was telling me about it.

"Well, he rubbed up against all the greats. Harold Lloyd, Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, all of 'em. And he got close. Laughton was a big guy, big personality, big sense of humour. You know the type: great guy to know, just never going to make the big time."

"Not unlike me, then," I said, smiling.

"Right! So he got close to the greats, got to be a friend with the legends. Confidante of Harpo. Best buddies. Anyway, so it goes, Harpo was sitting backstage one night with Laughton and they were really tearing into the booze and Harpo says, 'Do you want to know the real reason I don't speak in the movies?' and so Laughton, curious, says 'Uh-huh' and Harpo leans into him real close and says 'Because what I've got to say ain't funny.' So Laughton asks Harpo what he means, and Harpo tells him that he knows things, things so terrible that no one could possibly be ready to hear them. He says that in time only the funniest, only the most powerful, *visceral* voices are going to be able to keep everything from flying apart."

"That's what you keep saying. Flying apart. What's going to fly apart?"

Lenny had stopped outside a souvenir shop. He spun the postcard rack. Smut revolved in a flicker of tits and ass. "Reality, Ed. The very memory that confines our structure." He looked at me with his eyebrows raised, an incredibly open expression on his face. "Harpo told Laughton a story about when he was a kid. He woke up one night in total darkness. He said how this was odd, since there was always a little light coming in through the curtains, but he couldn't see shit. Like he'd gone blind. And when he reached up to touch his face, the little fingers that were growing out of his eyeballs seized his hands and squeezed and wouldn't let go. Imagine the terror, Ed. Harpo said that they held on so tight he still had the bruises between his fingers the next morning. He screamed and screamed and brought the fuckin' roof in till his folks came in and put on the light. He said he was just sitting there in a puddle of piss, staring at his hands like they'd turned into claws. 'Never was a good sleeper after that, Norv,' he'd said, and, as Laughton put it, 'Laughed, but with desperate tears in his eyes.'"

Lenny walked on. *Unbelievable*, I wanted to say, but I couldn't get the picture out of my head of that baby lying



there on the scuffed lino-tiled floor, tiny pale arms reaching out, and just for a moment — such a brief, flickering instant, and then it was gone — I had been sure I had seen another, much smaller face staring out at me from within its bubblegum pink, toothless mouth, wheezing with awful effort to be delivered.

I PUT TWO MUGS OF TEA down on the table and sat facing Lenny. The stereo was playing McAlmont and Butler.

"I'm a progressive jazz cat myself," Lenny said, "but this ain't bad."

I broke open a pack of Marlboro and lit up. "So, you're telling me that what happened to Harpo Marx is going to happen again?"

"Kinda. Except that what happened to Harpo has probably happened countless times before, to countless numbers of people."

"Yeah, but hands in the eyes? In the mouth? I'd've noticed that."

"Not necessarily. How many asylums full of people who're there because they've seen something they can't understand? How many people driven to madness not because their minds are failing, but because the very fabric of which they're a part has lost its way for a while? How much has gone unnoticed by dull eyes? Would you want to admit to seeing things crawling out of the walls, Ed? I know you've seen it. I let you see it. Brief, right, but the anticipation of seeing it again won't leave you now. Just like with Harpo. Just like Laughton, who started to notice things almost constantly towards the end. Just briefly, like things swelling and waving at him from the corner of his eye where someone's face should be. Features not aligned properly, missing freckles, blemishes, new scars, then all back to normal again in the fraction of a second. And he reckoned it wouldn't be long before the changes happened at a catastrophic level. A permanent breakdown in the constituent design of reality."

I'd smoked my cigarette down to the filter. I tapped off an inch of ash and stubbed it out. I lit another. Lenny got up from the table and paced the room.

I said, "What's this got to do with you? What's this 'paladin of idle conceit' crack?"

"Laughton became obsessed. Obsessed with the sadness he saw in all these fuckin' clowns. Obsessed with seeing what was behind our need to make reality seem ridiculous by laughing at it. And you know what, Ed? He came up with the idea that life didn't like us laughing at it. Life wants to be taken seriously with all its random tragedy

and subtle ironies, all its cataclysms and fineries. He thought that maybe we were weakening it by drawing strength from laughter and that it was trying to fight back and create something else from us, something less likely to ridicule it. And he was right!

"And now nobody knows what's funny any more. When I was doing my stuff, it was pretty fucking clear to me that I had a line to cross and I crossed it as often as I could. If we ain't got somebody to show us our hypocrisies, Ed, we become the ridiculous, and that ain't right.

"Anyhow, Laughton wrote it all down before he died back in '53."

Lenny reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

"He came up with the idea that when things got rough, people would appear who could alert us to the state of our complacency: writers and comedians, wits and playwrights, taking the kind of risks that would make them for a time incandescent, standing between us and the thundering indignant power that made us, and attempting to move us on up the ladder toward higher thought before we could be irrevocably changed into something dumb and compliant. Paladins of idle conceit, he called them. What a guy!"

Lenny handed me the piece of paper. I unfolded it and read: *We are all almost something else. We stand on the brink, a canted rhythm of atoms. Modify the orbit and — monstrous! — we are a counter product. The relentless irritation of variables and the unending urgency of chaos; there is an alchemy inherent in my parts, the colossal and eternal process holding everything together has a drive to decay — I am in uproar!*

"Drove him bugfuck, poor bastard. Look, you gotta get me a gig somewhere. If I can do my stuff, maybe there'll be a fuckin' renaissance. Ha ha."

"I'll make that call," I said, and dialled my agent.

I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE WARM-UP FOR SOME LOUSY sitcom audience later that evening. Some three-in-a-bed sit thing flogging a flimsy premise and getting big laughs for every cleverly applied knob gag and an apoplexy of rebellious mirth for a really gratuitous wank-inclusion. How far we've come.

That was it for me, really. A TV studio full of students dressed in witless-chic is about as low as you can get, but I knew the form and I knew what to give them to get through fairly unscathed: any old bollocks so long as it was crude, basically.

I told my agent that I was sick with something and couldn't make the gig, but I had someone willing to stand in.

"Is he any good?"

"He's better than me, Mike."

"Is that a recommendation? What's his name?"

"I looked across at Lenny for inspiration.

"His name...his name is Frank Dell. Frank Dell, dean of satire."

Lenny was loving it.

"Get him to the studio by 7:30," Mike said, and hung up.

THE IDEA WAS TO GET LENNY THERE LATE, SO LATE

in fact that Mike wouldn't even have time to get a good look at him, let alone ask to see his Equity card. I'd left Mike high and dry, I knew. He'd only hired me for this gig because he couldn't get anyone else, so I knew he'd be a little lax over the formalities. Warm-ups for these kind of shows are thankless, often arduous nightmares; the audience has got in free and they don't owe you a thing. You're out there stepping over cables and lighting rigs, getting obscured by shifting scenery, having all your punchlines blown by the director when they want to get on with the shoot. You're comedy's equivalent of elevator music basically, or one of those irritating jingles put over the phone line when you're on hold.

"No problem, chum," Lenny said when I had explained it all to him. He was pacing the flat, wrapped up in going through his routines like it was still 1963. It was wonderful to hear him, his beautiful, broad, sonorous voice rattling those famous schticks out just for me, and after a while I just sat there on the sofa and listened to him, tears in my eyes, letting the master work.

WE WERE AT THE STUDIO BY EIGHT. MIKE WAS

outside, chewing on his cigarette, his coat collar turned up and the inevitable expression of jaded disappointment on his face as we arrived.

"Mike," I said, "this is Frank Dell."

They shook hands.

Mike didn't even bother to acknowledge me and I had a feeling there wouldn't be much more of this kind of work coming my way after tonight.

"You've done this kind of thing before, Frank?" he asked.

Lenny beamed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure, Mike. Been a while, but I think you'll dig my stuff. Got it all down."

Mike led the way along the corridors backstage. "You've got about three minutes, Frank. Place is full, so just get out there and enjoy yourself."

He let Lenny slip past and I saw him, just for a moment, framed in the doorway leading out to the studio floor, rows of people up on scaffold seating to his right, and I knew what he was thinking. He knew he was going to go out there and *murder* these people.

Mike turned to me and said, "Where did you find this guy? *Stars in Their fucking Eyes?*"

"He's just a little old fashioned," I answered.

"I thought you were supposed to be sick, anyway."

"Migraine," I fabricated lamely.

"Well you've given me enough frigging headaches, Eddie. Okay, Frank?"

Lenny stepped out into the lights. London lights. Not exactly the Palladium, but then he'd hooked up with D'Andrea, not Izzard.

Notwithstanding, the last great paladin of idle conceit was back on his game.

I SUPPOSE MY GREATEST MISTAKE WAS LETTING

Lenny entrance me so easily, seduce me into believing he was some kind of talisman against what would happen

later. I should have guessed, really, that things were different now. Too different.

If you listen to recordings of Lenny at the height of his power, along with the sophistication of his delivery, his timing and his phenomenal ability to improvise, you'll also get a sense of his vulnerability.

One of Lenny's most famous routines was about the Palladium. If you were anybody you played there, if you played there you'd made it. The story goes that a rising young comic leans on his agent to get him a spot there, insisting he's played his last Vegas lounge. He's ready for the really class rooms now. In spite of his agent's misgivings, he lands him a spot on the bill. The rest of the story describes in gorgeous detail his ensuing and inevitable humiliation.

You have to bear in mind how long ago it was that he did this stuff, the climate of his time.

Things *have* changed.

LENNY BOMBED.

I think it was undoubtedly the most painful thing I have ever had to watch. It started almost the moment he stepped out and the audience got their first real good look at him. He played to utter silence for the first five minutes, and then, predictably, the hecklers found their voice. That wasn't such a great problem because Lenny could deal with them, it was just that he couldn't get his routines to work. He began to sweat. Then the filming began and he wouldn't shut up for it. He just carried on, pacing the floor, whipping the microphone lead behind him, his face white and strained, while the audience clapped and hooted. When the director went across to him and yanked at the arm of his jacket, Lenny shoved him off, called him a "Fuckin' nitwit" and ploughed on with his act.

The crowd erupted with delight. A rogue warm-up was better than any of them could have imagined, and they showed their appreciation by howling and catcalling. When finally, inundated by airborne seat cushions, his face a mixture of panic and furious affront, the director pulled the plug in desperation and called security, Lenny was screaming, screaming that they were laughing at the wrong stuff, the *wrong stuff*!

I watched all this with a terrible feeling in my heart of inevitability and guilt. Inevitability because things have changed too much in so short a time, and guilt because I should have told him it would never work but didn't because I'd had Lenny Bruce back and all to myself and I'd been enjoying myself too much.

I left Mike standing there, his big face blotchy with a fury I knew was directed solely at me, and walked back out onto the street.

I could still hear the crowd in uproar as I put my arm out for a taxi. I thought it would probably be for the best if I forgot about comedy for a while. I didn't feel like laughing much now anyway.

I NEVER SAW LENNY BRUCE AGAIN AFTER THAT night, but I began to grow aware that some of the strange and random changes he had warned me about were

becoming more frequent. Allie, I knew sadly, had also become more aware of the new changes within me.

Our usual banter was grimly forced now, and I felt that soon perhaps she would become sick of seeing my dismal face first thing in the morning, but there seemed little I could do about it. My mind was elsewhere now. And I just didn't find things particularly funny any more.

How do I know these things? Well, I've begun to see it everywhere now.

The other night I came back from the pub with Allie; she stormed off ahead because I had spent all evening feeling sorry for myself and had got drunk and maudlin, and there had been a man kneeling in the gutter, his back to us. Allie had stomped straight past him and gone up the steps to our flat, but I had seen him more clearly. I had seen him trying to pull the soft, segmented things from out of his mouth and shove them down the drain.

And now, the most awful thing.

I was woken tonight by a scream from outside the window. As I staggered across the room, I kept misjudging the distance of things and barked my shin on a chair and slammed my chest up against the window sill.

I fumbled with the net curtains and pressed my forehead against the glass, and saw, as if looking through the wrong end of a telescope, two men and a woman fighting in the road. The woman was dragging at the clothes of one of the men, trying to pull him away, her mouth a toothless 'O' of froth, while the second man held onto the lapels of the other's jacket and gored at his chest with the sharp plate of stubby horns his lower jaw had become.

I stepped away from the window, knowing I was either mad or that things were degenerating at a terrible rate, perhaps to the state of permanency forewarned by Lenny.

I did not expect to have this insight so quickly confirmed by my reflection in the dark mirror of the windowpane: incredibly huge, filled with a dumb and humourless understanding, my solitary, lidless eye gazed implacably back at me.

There was a light tap at the door.

I glanced back at my reflection, just once, and I saw my face looking in at me as if coming up from a tank of dirty black liquid. Then, two eyes again. Normality in an instant, and enough to make me wonder if anything had really happened at all. Below, the street was empty.

Not sure what I was really doing, I stumbled across and opened the door.

A short, stocky man stood in the total darkness of the hall. I could see nothing of him but his bulk, but when he spoke I knew the voice at once. Plummy with a hint of weary cynicism, a voice unheard since he had taken his own life in a bath tub so many years ago.

"Eddie," said Hancock, "I just need another half hour. Can you help me?"

I gently shut the door.

I wanted to laugh.

PAUL MELOY was born in South London in 1966, and now lives in Cambridge with his wife Denise. He recently qualified as a psychiatric nurse and is now working at an adolescent unit. The above is his first published story.



Some time ago, I wrote an article in which I presumed to question and criticise the motives of contemporary writers. Looking back, I now see that I had a head full of inadequately considered opinions which I promptly committed to paper and fired off for publication (yes, I know that's what I usually do — but I like to think of it as an endearing personal foible).

It was Lewis Carroll who finally revealed to me the error of my ways. I was rummaging through a book trying to locate that author's poem 'Phantasmagoria', to read to my youngest daughter, when I encountered 'Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur'. The poem tells of a child asking his grandfather how to become a poet. In reply the old man says:

*For first you write a sentence,
And then you chop it small;
Then mix the bits, and sort them out
Just as they chance to fall:
The order of the phrases makes
No difference at all.*

The grandfather continues in this vein, advising the lad to be 'consistently obscure'; he also recommends that the child should first of all decide upon the length of his poem, and that he should then 'fill it up with padding'.

It all seemed terribly familiar, the formula that the grandfather presented to the young aspirant as being the way to become a poet. In the small press particularly one encounters reams of stuff that appears to have been produced to this very blueprint: obscure, 'experimental' garbage that either seems utterly pointless, or appears to try to mimic the impenetrable style of genuine literary experimenters. As I read 'Poeta...' I smiled and nodded smugly to myself. Ah yes, Carroll was taking the piss out of charlatan writers who try to bluff their way to fame or fortune; those unworthy vermin of impure motive. In the article I mentioned above, I was largely concerned with horror writers who churn out volume after volume of blood-soaked, derivative but *marketable* slime; however the crime is the same—writing without due care and integrity.

Upon publication of that previous piece I was taken to task by someone who pointed out that one could never be sure of the motives of others. A valid point, but it would take more than logic to divert me from a lifetime of gut-reaction judgements. After all, I sometimes wear the critic's hat, and I wasn't about to rationalise myself out of a job by accepting that I had no right to judge. Better to come up

with some other justification. Right, how does this sound? *It is acceptable to make subjective judgements, and to form opinions regarding the worth of the work under scrutiny, provided one safeguards against hypocrisy by first ensuring that one's own house is in order (according to the same standards and criteria one applies to others).* It seemed OK to me. Cadger's Law, as I dubbed my hurriedly contrived axiom, admitted the subjectivity of any assessment and declared that I would demand no more of others than I expected of myself. And just to show what a scrupulous fellow I was, I did indeed survey my own house...little suspecting that there may be a crack or two in its foundations. I began my self-critique.

Did I write formulaic fiction in the knowledge that I could place it with an appropriate market? No, I decided with some relief, I didn't. *Did I copy the work/style/plot of other authors?* Er, no...but I suppose I had to admit to admiring the work of certain writers, and probably to having been influenced by it, but that wasn't the same thing. Or was it? Where does one draw the line between influence and emulation? I reassured myself with the observation that my work hardly bore comparison with that of my heroes Shakespeare, Wilde, Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell...Funny how reassurance and depression can seem so similar. I pressed on resolutely. *Did I write obscure, experimental stuff in the hope that I would convince people into thinking I was some kind of literary genius?* Nope. *Was I in it for the money?* I decided not to answer silly questions.

So far so good. As I have never got the hang of quitting while I was ahead, I decided to try to define what *did* motivate my writing. I am on record as stating that I regard writing as an obsessive-compulsive disorder: I think that is truer than I realised. If, for example, I don't write anything for a few days due to other demands on my time, I get decidedly twitchy, even irritable. It is an addiction.

I usually enjoy writing, although once the initial inspiration has dissipated, there is often something of the chore about the process. Like the man said, it's 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. And there is usually that slight feeling of disappointment when my finished piece doesn't quite capture the essence of the spark that sired it.

But none of that explains why I do it. In a previous *Unquiet Soul* I opined that music and literature are a shot at immortality. Aargh — I am

discovered! Yes, I have to admit that it is the possibility of fame that fuels my efforts. Am I a sad bastard? I hope not. The fame of which I speak is not the pedestal-inhabiting, look-at-me-I'm-wonderful, surrounded-by-admirers kind of ego trip that might at first come to mind. They say that we each die twice: once when we perform the physical act of croaking, and again when the last person who knew us finally passes away or forgets. I would rather be here in person, of course, but failing that I intend to leave as much mnemonic substance behind me as I can. While I'm in the confessional I'd better admit that the reason I write reviews (and the *real* reason I originally agreed to do *Unquiet Soul*) is to keep my name in the minds of readers between story appearances. So although I write the best stuff I can, and despite being fairly proud of what I've produced so far, I suppose it is just an ego trip after all. Oh well...

Let me close with an anecdote on the subject of fame that probably won't amuse you as much as it embarrasses me.

At the launch party of one of Chris Kenworthy's splendid Barrington Books anthologies, I was wallowing in the flattering novelty of being asked to sign books (this was before I got *really* famous, you understand). Being adequately lubricated, as is my habit at genre get-togethers, I vaguely recall assuming the role of the gracious celebrity: 'Yes, certainly. Who shall I make it out to? No, please don't mention it. All in a day's work for us authors, you know.'

'To "Steve" please,' said one of my legion of adoring fans. 'Thanks.'

'Done any writing?' I asked, genially.

'A little.'

When the autograph hunter had gone I felt a slap to the back of my head. 'I didn't know you knew Steve Gallagher,' said a fellow contributor.

I tracked Gallagher to the bar and apologised for not recognising him. Then, just to be on the safe side, I apologised a few more times. He was very understanding, but he seemed a little preoccupied. He kept moving from side to side as if trying to catch the attention of someone behind me. I eventually moved on, racking my brain—the expression upon Gallagher's face had been familiar; I'd seen it on the faces of innumerable celebrities at innumerable conventions and launch parties. Then I recognised it; it was the expression that means 'Will someone get this bloody drunk off me.'

THE MISDIRECTION

THE NOVELS OF CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

· 'There should...be little facts that don't add up, that misdirect the truth...'

The Quiet Woman

· 'There was I who was writing. There was I whom I could remember. And
· there was I of whom I wrote, the protagonist of the story. The difference
· between factual truth and imaginative truth was constantly on my mind.'

The Affirmation

· Christopher Priest, born 1943, published his first short story in 1966 ('The
· Run' in *Impulse*, collected in *Real-Time World*) and his first novel in 1970.
· Although 'Palely Loitering' and 'The Watched' (both in *An Infinite Summer*)
· were Hugo-nominated and 'An Infinite Summer' (written originally for *The*
· *Last Dangerous Visions* — see *The Book on the Edge of Forever* for more on
· this) is frequently anthologised, it's fair to say that Priest's primary impact
· on the sf/fantasy genre is as a novelist, particularly with *Inverted World*. In
· 1983 he was named one of the twenty Best Young British Novelists: he
· appears in the promotional issue of *Granta* with a novella, 'The Miraculous
· Cairn', set in the Dream Archipelago (of which more later). He has been a
· full-time writer since 1968: his bibliography includes the commercial
· assignments (two ghostwritten autobiographies and a children's book
· among them — the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* mentions
· an undisclosed number of pseudonymous novels, not listed, also some
· largely unproduced TV and radio work, including a BBC Radio 4 adaptation
· of *The Glamour*) perhaps inevitable for a novelist who isn't a best-seller.

· Priest's novels fall into three phases. The first culminates with *Inverted*
· *World*, probably his finest achievement within the parameters of genre sf.
· *The Space Machine* and *A Dream of Wessex* form a transition: both are
· undoubtedly sf novels and of the genre, particularly the former, a pastiche of
· an homage to HG Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*,
· though in their literary focus (all the novels from *A Dream of Wessex*
· onwards can be read as metaphors for the creation of art) and introspection
· (much of the latter novel takes place in a 'reality' formed from the psyche of
· the main characters) they look forward to Priest's later novels.

· The final phase to date comprises four novels, each with a title formed
· from the definite article and a noun, with the exception of *The Quiet*
· *Woman*, which adds an adjective. These novels are self-consciously written
· works: their narratives — and narratives within narratives — are not to be
· taken at face value. *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour* in particular are
· postmodern novels: the words we read, the story we are told, turns out to be
· a construct, behind which lies...what? Priest has always written
· 'transparent' prose — clear, calm, measured, precise, not overtly stylised
· with the exception of the Victorian pastiche of *The Space Machine* and most
· of *The Prestige* — but that transparency is not to be trusted. All are based on
· sf premises (parallel worlds and immortality in *The Affirmation*, invisibility
· in *The Glamour*, near-future dystopia in *The Quiet Woman*, matter
· transmission and duplication in *The Prestige*) but cannot easily be read as
· genre sf or fantasy. If genre sf makes the fantastic seem real or at least
· scientifically plausible, in these novels 'reality' is a construct, on a par with
· and not always distinguishable from fantasy.

· Narrative form has always interested Priest: *Inverted World*, *The Glamour*
· and *The Prestige* are told from differing viewpoints (in the first two cases

Gary
Couzens

mixing third and first person, in the last almost entirely in the first). *The Quiet Woman* has two mutually contradictory narratives, one in the third person and the other in the first. Even an 'I' can be deceptive: in one of Priest's works (I won't reveal which one), a single first person account turns out to be the work of two people; in another, a narrator assumed by the reader to be male is revealed to be female.

Indoctrinaire was Priest's first novel and is far from his best, an opinion shared by Priest — see, amongst others, *Foundation* #50 — who has kept the novel out of print since 1979. It concerns a circular plain in the Brazilian jungle, which is a gate that takes Wentik, the protagonist, two centuries into the future. The novel's main problem is an overlong first third, wherein Wentik is subjected to a series of mysterious, even Kafkaesque, tests. These turn out to be incidental to the plot and seem little more than padding; tedium sets in. The novel does pick up after this poor start and there are a couple of memorable images (a hand with a pointing finger growing from a tabletop; a giant ear set in a wall), but maybe Priest is right in thinking he is better represented elsewhere.

Fugue for a Darkening Island is much stronger, indeed the best of Priest's early novels. The title has more than one meaning. A fugue, in the musical sense, is a composition based on the interweaving of more than one theme (reflected in the novel's distinctive structure); it is also a mental state involving loss of identity, a favourite Priestian theme. Told in first person by Alan Whitman, *Fugue* is set in the near future (from the novel's publication that is — reading it now, it takes place in a parallel mid-1970s) and concerns Britain's decline into civil war, brought about by a right-wing government and an influx of African refugees ('Afrims') from a nuclear war. The novel is notable for its complex contrapuntal, unchronological structure, alternating between the events leading up to and the events following a 'crux event'. This is analysable as follows: the main crux event is the abduction of Isobel and Sally, Whitman's wife and daughter. One narrative strand details what ensues; the other strand ends with this scene. This second strand begins at another crux event, Whitman and family's escape from home. A third strand details (out of chronological order) Whitman's life and the worsening social situation up to this second crux. Such contrapuntal narrative obviously appeals to Priest: the autobiography of Britain's first astronaut Helen Sharman, which he ghosted, has a simplified version of the above structure, with one crux event, the rocket launch.

Priest describes the composition thus: 'The book was drafted as a series of events disjointed in time... When I had finished the draft, I physically cut the manuscript into pieces, and reassembled it according to how I felt it should be. I rewrote several sections as a result, and deliberately wrote one extra; this is one that fits nowhere into any of the various strands and consciously slips a joker into the pack.' (*Foundation* #50)

It is easy to see why the novel is told this way: an antichronological, fragmented narrative is ideal for conveying a disintegrating Britain and enables Priest to counterpoint this with Whitman's marital and sexual failure. However, it sits uneasily with Whitman's characterisation: as an 'ordinary' man you feel he would produce a conventional, chronological account.

As for the novel's alleged racism: it is certainly not politically correct (a concept which did not exist in 1972), and Whitman harbours habitual, almost instinctive racist attitudes probably common amongst men of his generation and background. We are certainly distanced from Whitman, who is not always sympathetic — it is clear from his accounts of his failing marriage that Isobel would have her own story, which we don't hear — but it is also the case that the Afrims are never seen as anything but a threatening 'other'.

Inverted World, which won the BSFA Award, was nominated for a Hugo and made the French best-seller lists, is not Priest's best novel (it is sluggishly paced in parts, particularly early on, and rather flatly characterised) but is his best *sf* novel. Note the distinction. In terms of the rigorously logical working out of a non-realistic premise, it surpasses Priest's





other work and almost all British sf of its time; in purely literary terms it falls short. Which of these distinctions is the more important is a long-running debate in sf criticism, and one outside the scope of this article. It is set in the City of Earth, which travels along rail-tracks on a world in the form of an inverted hyperbola spinning on its axis. The City has to keep moving or else it would face destruction. The central character is Helward Mann, a Future Surveyor (assessing the landscape up ahead, where time slows down — behind the City or 'down past' it speeds up). It is largely through his eyes that we discover the reality behind the City's situation and the nature of the world it inhabits. Without giving too much away, perception of consensus reality turns out to be distorted, although not, as in Priest's later novels, by means of a psyche or psyches but by a machine.

Inverted World forms the high-water mark of Priest's career as a sf writer. His next novel, *The Space Machine*, shows his trying out a new direction. A first person narrative in pastiche Victorian English, the novel is a homage to HG Wells (who appears as a character towards the end and to whom the novel is dedicated), with a plot that conflates *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. It is a novel that takes sf's history as its subject. The Mars of this novel — Priest's only one set anywhere else apart from Earth or the Dream Archipelago, which is effectively an alternate Earth — is the Mars Wells would have imagined: a populated, canal-ridden planet. Priest is not a naturally humorous writer, and the comic aspects of this novel (derived from the narrator, Edward Turnbull's reticence and stuffiness) are heavy-handed. *The Space Machine* is also, at some 125,000 words, considerably overlong. An ending casting doubt on what we have read (Wells says on p362: 'It would not be right to dismiss your account as total fabrication, but you would be hard put to substantiate what you told me') feels tacked-on. Nineteenth-Century English is better used as a narrative device in *The Prestige*.

In *A Dream of Wessex*, a group of volunteers participate in an experiment to form a group hallucination or 'projection' of England two centuries hence. In this 'future', the West Country has split off from the mainland and enjoys a Mediterranean climate. This future is not 'real', as a conventional sf novel would endeavour to make it, but is the consensus production of a group of minds. The metaphor for artistic creation is obvious, and all Priest's novels from this one onwards feature such metaphors. When some of the characters return to 'reality' late on, it is in fact nothing of the kind, but a projection from the projected future world. In other words, fantasy is formed out of reality, but also reality can be formed out of fantasy as well, a theme that is treated much more complexly in his next novel, *The Affirmation*. At the end of the novel, reality is not re-established: the three principal characters remain in the projection, literally a world of their own making. One of the three is projected into a world of which he is the sole creator, the ultimate in solipsism. Future Island Wessex can be seen as a prototype for the Dream Archipelago.

None of Priest's novels form a series. In some cases there are a few references in the form of reuse of character names, most notably between *The Affirmation* and *The Quiet Woman*. The Dream Archipelago forms the setting of the short stories and novellas 'Whores' (a genuine horror story, its sf premise notwithstanding), 'The Negation' and 'The Watched', all collected in *An Infinite Summer*, and the uncollected stories 'The Miraculous Cairn' and 'The Cremation'. *The Affirmation* is also partially set there, though uses the Archipelago in a different way. These stories do not form a series as such, as the Archipelago is more a common setting — there are very few links.

In *The Affirmation*, the Archipelago is an invention of Peter Sinclair, a man who sets about writing his autobiography in order to make sense of his life. Soon, a bald recital of facts and dates, seems less important than a higher, imaginative truth. Names are changed, also places. London, for example, becomes 'Jethra', one of the islands of the Archipelago. In this parallel world, Sinclair's manuscript is used to restore his memory after an immortality treatment leaves him with amnesia — at this point reality and

fantasy interpenetrate with great complexity. No resolution is possible: the novel ends in mid-sentence, exactly the same way as Sinclair's manuscript does, by which time reality and fantasy — each one being the product of the other — have become inextricably fused. The device of ending in mid-sentence, indicating that the novel we have been reading has been written by one of the characters is not new. But in such as Samuel Delany's *Nova*, for example, such a device is little more than a final grace-note to a story that has already been concluded. Here it is vital to the novel's undeniably enigmatic meaning, and enables *The Affirmation*, as has already been pointed out, to be read as its own sequel.

In *The Glamour*, Richard Grey, a photographer seriously injured and rendered amnesiac by a car-bomb, recovers his memory — or does he? The novel, mostly written in third person, features two long first person flashbacks detailing the relationship of Grey and Susan Kewley, one of which contradicts the other. After a long account of their meeting and affair on holiday in France, it is undeniably jolting for her to say 'I've never been to France'. There is a final twist to the novel, which undermines the status of all that has gone before — once again, one character's psyche reaches out and controls that of others.

On the surface, *The Quiet Woman* is a much more realistic novel — it is borderline sf only in its near-future setting. The central character is Alice Stockton, a writer whose latest book has inexplicably been impounded by the Home Office. Also, her neighbour and friend, the elderly Eleanor Hamilton, has been murdered. It is the near future, and large parts of Southern England have been poisoned by a nuclear accident. And onto the scene comes Gordon Sinclair, Eleanor's son whom she never mentioned. The novel is told alternately in third person from Alice's viewpoint (except for Chapters 5 and 11, which comprise Eleanor's letter to Alice) and in first person from Gordon's viewpoint. But the two narratives do not coincide. There are several episodes in Gordon's narrative that are clearly fantasy: a UFO episode, a plane crash during Eleanor's funeral unnoticed by the other mourners, and two sexual fantasies involving Alice which might read as violent pornography out of context. The key to these passages is where Gordon describes how, as a child, he could produce dream imagery at will. Despite what he says, he is still doing so, and once again the boundary between reality and fantasy is lost. Needless to say, Gordon is not a sympathetic character, and through his characterisation — he works in surveillance — Priest explicates the process by which Britain slowly becomes an obsessively secretive, paranoid dystopia.

Priest's latest novel, World Fantasy Award winning *The Prestige*, is a long, complex story in which the rivalry between two nineteenth-century stage magicians plays out amongst their descendants in the present day. Told in a series of first person narratives (although the final chapter of Part Three, written from Kate Angier's viewpoint, moves briefly into the third), *The Prestige* is a very accomplished and rewarding novel and is a model of intricate, surprising plot. Matter transmission and duplication are involved in the resolution of the novel's mysteries, and real-life scientist Nikola Tesla makes an appearance. All Priest's customary themes appear: narrative unreliability (one section in particular), the creation of art — stage magic used metaphorically — and its relation to solipsism. It is a novel that amply entertains, though is maybe less deeply felt than some of its predecessors.

If fantasy describes a world that could never exist, sf describes a world that plausibly might. Priest started his career writing sf and still regards his work as being at the core of what sf should be trying to do. He has also expressed on more than one occasion (see for example *Foundation* #50, p100, effectively a manifesto) his dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary sf, all sharecrops and media tie-ins. As a consequence his novels are published as mainstream fiction rather than sf. In his later novels, he has become effectively a slipstream writer (before the term was invented), taking the thematic concerns of sf and fantasy and fusing them with those of mainstream literature.

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Thanks to Des Lewis for the loan of some of the above

letters

from **Paul Leonard, Bristol**

I think Justina Robson and others on the letters page [TTA13] are making an interesting distinction when they talk about 'their' horror and the slash-and-gore kind, but I'm not sure that it's the distinction they think they're making.

It's obvious that pretty well all the correspondents involved are intelligent, sensitive people for whom fiction is a labour of love, and in most cases, not their main job. The producers of slash-and-gore fiction (let's avoid calling it horror!) are for the most part full-time writers, and they need to produce stuff quickly and sell it.

Part of the problem is marketing. Someone who produces three or four short stories a year (as I used to) is simply not a marketable product for a big publisher, however good the quality of the work. Three or four novels a year is more like it. But then quality suffers — as can be demonstrated by a quick look at the work of almost any high-output novelist. The time needed to generate the subtle effects that Robson *et al* are so good at producing simply isn't available (and I'm not necessarily talking about writing time here — thinking time counts too, and three or four novels a year doesn't leave room for much of that).

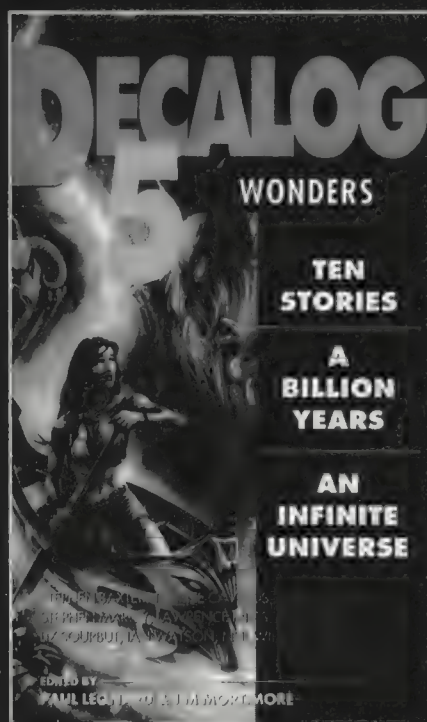
Of course, there are those who seem to manage to produce very good stuff quickly — I think the best word for this is 'genius' — and it's rare. Be under no illusions, those of you who aren't geniuses: commercial pressures are very bad for your writing!

This is why I think magazines like TTA are vital to the health of fiction — any sort of fiction. They provide an outlet for the quality stuff which would otherwise only very rarely see the light of day, and inspire writers like myself (who haven't got the time to be perfect) to at least

write a little bit better. Quality of the sort seen in your pages permeates literature — and its ultimate source is those for whom writing is a labour of love.

[Paul Leonard, perhaps better known to longstanding TTA readers as 'PJL Hinder', has recently edited, with Jim Mortimore, *Decalog 5: Wonders for Virgin Publishing* (out now in B-format paperback, 314pp, £5.99/\$6.95, ISBN 0-426-20515-4). *Sensawunda is alive and well in this awe-inspiring anthology of ten science fiction stories about the wonders of the universe. Contributions from Stephen Baxter, Ian Watson, Dominic Green, Stephen Marley, Liz Sourbut, Jeanne Cavelos, Lawrence Miles... and two brilliant stories from TTA regulars Neil Williamson ('City of Hammers') and Mike O'Driscoll ('Painting the Age with the Beauty of our Days'). Highly recommended!*

Paul would like to thank all TTA contributors who sent him work, and he hopes to be in touch with you all again some time.]



from **Ramsey Campbell, Wallasey**

I've been intrigued by the correspondence about horror and have found much of interest there. May I suggest that (maybe just for economy's sake) Jason Gould [TTA13] oversimplifies slightly when he says writers such as Mark Morris and Nicholas Royle are replacing Shaun Hutson? Surely they are part of a different tradition. Hutson's is that of gore films and of the Pan books of horror, which derived from the *Not at Night* series, proudly described by its editor as designed to exclude literature, whereas Mark and Nick, and certainly Joel Lane, regard horror fiction as a branch of literature, which at its best it is. If they were replacing anyone it would be old stools like me, whom they've cited as an influence — Joel has written several detailed studies of my stuff — but I don't think they want to do away with me just yet, and I've plenty still to write. May we all flourish!

from **Dave Lazarus, Margate**

Endless thanks to *The Third Alternative* for saving my life — not literally, but literarily. Having been brought up on the school stodge of authors who died before I was born, I graduated to slash and horror fiction with a sigh of relief.

Ultimately, gore is not that satisfying. Better than school stodge, but a lot of gristle gets stuck in your teeth.

I came to TTA as a virgin and came away as a literary whore. Yes, unbelievable stuff this. Loved Nicholas Royle's 'Uist' and just couldn't get enough of Clifford Thurlow's 'The Healing'. These stories lure you into a seemingly normal world, among normal folk, but there's some underlying menace that keeps you on the edge of the chair to the very end. I started reading Friday afternoon and finished before lights out.

May I therefore make a suggestion: instead of four times a year, perhaps you could up TTA to six issues, twelve even. That would give you (and us) the space for more brilliant fiction from the likes of Thurlow and Royle.

[Thanks Dave, letters like this make all the difference, even though they don't usually get printed in the magazine. To answer your query about increasing TTA's schedule though: yes, that would be great, but we need a much firmer base yet to build on, like a few thousand more subscribers and a more established presence in the shops. Please keep spreading the word, and maybe even get your local bookshops and newsagents to order the magazine.]

from **Faisal Ahmad, Huddersfield**

Thanks a lot for TTA13. The stories by Nicholas Royle, Clifford Thurlow, Allen Ashley and Jason Frowley (I was a bit surprised to find out in the contributor's notes that he is a newcomer to the fiction market: his confident prose just swept me along) were all very fine, but the best was saved till last. Peter Crowther & James Lovegrove's 'Even Beggars Would Ride' took all the glory. It must be one of the longest TTA stories published [*it was the longest, up until this issue's 'Balzac's War' by Jeff VanderMeer*] and it was one of the best TTA stories I have read. It's stuff like this that makes Rick Cadger's comment that 'current writing is mere parasitism' seem a bit pessimistic.

I am pleased to hear that Ian McEwan's new novel *Enduring Love* has recently been released to intense critical acclaim. Whilst *Enduring Love* cannot be strictly classed as a horror novel, it has been written by an author whose early collections (as Roger Keen rightly said in TTA12) have become classics in the field of horror. I am led to believe that *Enduring Love* was to be a strong

contender for this year's Booker Prize by both the bookies and the critics before being omitted from the shortlist. This provoked a public mauling of the Booker judges by the broadsheet critics (something which seems to have become a yearly event). Anyway, this book and the attention it has generated for his earlier work can only be good for a genre which has taken many knocks over the years.

from **JF Haines, Warrington**

Rick Cadger is right — I want there to be aliens, too — but the chances of them being anything like the media versions is pretty remote. If we do ever make contact we may well not even recognise it as life at first!

Equally stunning, and with profound implications that I don't think anyone has really considered, is the thought that it is possible we may be alone — what then?

from **Paul Bradshaw, Bradford**

After reading your letters page I must mention that I am appalled at the term 'sad little horror wankers'. I find this most unnecessary and unkind, and shows a distinct lack of respect for other people's reading preferences.

I myself am not interested in reading what is described as 'slashfest rubbish' (another disrespectful term), but I do not condemn those who do, in the same way that I do not care to invent derogatory monickers for lovers of Catherine Cookson, Charles Dickens, even William Shakespeare, all of whom I have no desire to read.

I believe that one of the reasons why this country is in such a mess today is through lack of respect, mainly from young people, and I hate to see such a trait creeping into the world of fiction. People should be allowed to read what they like to read without being referred to as 'sad little horror wankers' or similar.

People can discuss all day long until they are blue in the face as to what horror really is or ought to be, but the truth of the matter is that different people are horrified by different things, and by different works of fiction. It's an individual thing. No amount of clever words can constitute what is perfect horror, no way. It comes in many, many guises, all equally terrible and chilling, from the imaginative horror of Lovecraft to the psychological horror of Christopher Priest to the erotic horror of Lucy Taylor to the powerful and contemporary horror of Poppy Z. Brite. So it is up to the individual to select which type suits them best, and to enjoy it. I have the utmost respect and admiration for the opinions of others, and believe that everyone should do the same without resorting to terms such as 'sad little horror wankers'.

[I would just like to reassure newer readers that neither TTA nor any of its contributors actually coined the term, 'sad little horror wankers'. That dubious honour belongs to John Duffield who used the phrase during a review, published in Interzone a few years back, of small press horror magazine Peeping Tom.]

from **Rhys Hughes, Swansea**

'Surrealism as metaphor'? [*Letters, TTA12*] Call me a boring old pedant but I always thought that surrealism dealt with a specific process: the transfer of images from one subconscious to another without using consciousness as a middleman. Surely, therefore, the images of surrealism are unfathomable to the conscious mind and thus can never be termed 'metaphors'? Isn't 'surrealism as metaphor' just another way of saying 'allegory' or even 'extreme allegory'? And isn't this in itself just another way of saying 'absurdism' (not to be confused with 'sillyism')?

A Cautious Approach to the Meaning of the 'Nature' of Reality

ESCAPE OVER



What is reality? A troublesome question, one you'd ask when spoiling for a fight. Or at least an irrational debate. Let's think about it in terms of a trivial example. Consider the magazine you are holding (just to clarify: the *example* is trivial, not the *magazine*). We can all agree it is a magazine, I think. We will also come to general agreement on the precise words printed in it. But when we start talking about what these words mean, we diverge in opinion. All right, yes, but so what? It is important because we all plan, relate and transact in accordance with the reality we create (or perhaps the one we merely accept) from the observations we make. Our peculiar perceptions of reality lead us in specific directions, sometimes toward trouble. For instance, in my first column for TTA, I made some remark about why people might have sex without condoms. My girlfriend was absolutely enraged because she thought I was admitting publicly that *I* had sex without condoms.

This particular divergence in personal realities did not cause much trouble, but it is easy to see extensions to more serious issues. Say, the Ku Klux Klan. These people — one assumes — not only believe they are justified in their attitudes, they imagine their beliefs are *facts*, or *reality*. Are they wrong? Yes, of course they are. But just try convincing them and see how far you get. Here we have conflict.

Reality is not wholly tangible. Instead, it is an interpretation filtered through our daily subjective appraisals. In the limit, each and every individual has a slightly different belief, experiences a slightly different reality, for everything in the world. As a society, we have to agree on some things because it is terribly inconvenient to approach every event as if each person's tweak is valid. Therefore, there is at least a general consensus regarding what constitutes a criminal act, say, or what the income tax rate schedule will be. Most things we can agree on, but some are touchy, like what is 'crazy', for instance.

That's a tough one. But it must be done, yes? It is not in society's best interest to have people running about who are a treacherous menace to themselves and everyone around them. The question becomes, 'Who is whom? Who is *normal* and who is *crazy*?' In the States, we like to leave these difficult decisions up to the 'experts' because that takes the responsibility out of the hands of the general public. In this case, the experts are psychologists and psychiatrists. It is surprising how many juristic outcomes depend entirely upon such expert testimony in cases ranging from murder to child custody. Makes you want to bury your head in the sand, doesn't it? Being something of a fringe element myself, I am intimately concerned and sadly acquainted with this process as it relates to the courts (I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time in civil court, I don't know why...). It is hard to imagine a more frightening scenario than being hauled into court over the question of whether you are mentally competent (I can hear it already: 'Jesus! You just said you had been hauled into court because you were insane.' 'That's not what I wrote.' 'Ha!' 'No, really, read it again.' 'Shut up! It says...'). Someone who does not know you at all interviews you for an hour and tells the court you need to be locked up for your own safety and the safety of others. And it happens, baby, just like that, lightning fast. Prozac for everyone and the Quiet Room if the drugs don't work. To help you relax. Doctor's orders. Eek.

Sometimes it is true, sure, some people *are* dangerous, but the power the psych profession wields is daunting. It's almost worse than the IRS. The point is, the potential exists to be punished for divergent perception, for the nature of your personal reality. Creepy, huh.

Well now, this subject would seem to be a veritable wellspring for fiction writers, especially suspense and horror folks. In my recent reading, I have come across a couple of novels that deal with the issue of reality explicitly. In the first, *Bad Karma* by Andrew Harper, we come away with a lock-em-up

attitude: these psychos are dangerous. The second, *Zod Wallop* by William Browning Spencer, leads us in the opposite direction. The characters in the latter are clearly loopy, but they seem merely eccentric as compared to dangerous. It is interesting and instructive to read these novels with the question of reality in mind, because literally everything depends on how we perceive truth, or fact, or *reality*.

Well, that's one way to look at it anyway.

Bad Karma is Andrew Harper's first novel, but it is not the author's first novel. See, Andrew Harper is a pen name for Douglas Clegg — you know, the author of *Goat Dance* (Pocket, 1989), *Breeder* (Pocket, 1990), *Neverland* (Pocket, 1991), *Dark of the Eye* (Pocket, 1994), and *The Children's Hour* (Dell, 1995). He decided to use the pseudonym only because *Bad Karma* is very different from his previous novels. It is more suspense oriented than straightforward horror, so the 'Andrew Harper' label signifies a different direction in his fiction. Not that he has given up writing horror — far from it. In fact, Clegg has recently sold two horror novels to Leisure that are scheduled for publication in 1998. Instead, he is *expanding* in new directions.

The story is about Trey Campbell, a psych tech who works at Darden State Hospital on a ward for the criminally insane. While Trey is vacationing on Santa Catalina Island, a horrible incident occurs at the hospital and one of the patients escapes. This is bad news for Trey because the escapee is Agnes Hatcher, an especially dangerous person who is obsessed with him and will do anything to track him down. Agnes was incarcerated at Darden because she used to perform surgeries on people, not only without their consent, but without the benefit of anaesthesia. Agnes believes that she and Trey share a sort of karmic bond and that they were lovers in a previous life. Perfect soul mates. She thinks he is the only one who understands her, and nothing will stand in her way of joining again with him. In her quest, she performs several gruesome murders, but the book is not about that. *Bad Karma* is about obsession, obsession and delusion and the effects of this psychosis not only on Agnes, but on the object of her desire, Trey.

I have long been of the opinion that Clegg is a master of character development. You can see that aspect of his writing shine through in this first Andrew Harper novel, too. We find out a great deal about Trey Campbell by the way he interacts with his wife and children in scenes that, superficially, do not seem to have a lot to do with the plot. Of course they really do. From observing Trey outside the context of the disaster at hand, we get insight about how he will behave when, say, his family is threatened. It is also in these scenes we as readers build an allegiance with the characters, where we start to feel like we know them. The trick is not to overdo it, because if you do, the novel bogs down and becomes boring. This is no problem for Clegg; he handles it superbly.

The novel is fast paced and can be read in one sitting. In fact, you will probably enjoy it more if you *do* read it in one sitting because of the way the suspense and tension build as you go along. You would lose some of that if you put it down and came back to it the next day.

Bad Karma is a rocket-ride. Recommended reading for our studies into the nature of reality.

Zod Wallop, on the other hand, is a more introspective novel. It has received high critical praise far and wide. Everybody loves it: *New York Times*, *Kirkus*, *Locus*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*. Now that I have finally gotten around to reading it, I will add my name to the list. This is a cool book.

'Zod Wallop' is a children's book written by our main character, Harry Gainesborough, who had done well for himself in this arena for quite some time — right up to the point when his daughter died. After that, he didn't have it in him any more because he hadn't really been writing children's books all along anyway. He had been writing books for *his* daughter. In her absence, he didn't see the point. The odd thing is, 'Zod Wallop' was actually



BAD KARMA

Andrew Harper

Kensington, May 1997

240 pages, hardcover

US\$22.00

ISBN: 1-57566-160-8

ZOD WALLOP

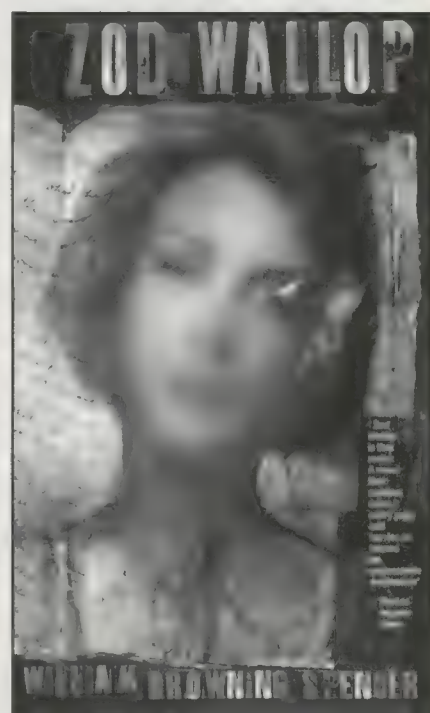
William Browning Spencer

White Wolf/Borealis, February 1997

360 pages, mass market paperback

US\$5.99

ISBN: 1-56504-870-9



• written *after* his daughter died. The *really* odd thing is there are two
 • different versions of 'Zod Wallop': the cruel, no-one-here-gets-out-alive
 • version Harry wrote as a therapeutic device to deal with his daughter's
 • death, and the happy-ending version that was actually published. A blunt
 • dichotomy, but it works.

• The situation gets wild when Raymond, a psychiatric patient, steals the
 • 'dark' book from Harry and believes the events described in it are real.
 • Raymond claims to have burned the only copy, but he did not. Raymond
 • escapes from the institution and goes on a journey to prevent the
 • destruction of the world which, he is absolutely convinced, will happen any
 • moment. He sucks Harry into the journey as well, causing Harry to see his
 • book in a whole new light.

• Sounds kind of cheesy, right? Well, it doesn't read that way. It is an
 • outlandish fantasy because the supernatural characters from the book 'Zod
 • Wallop' in *Zod Wallop* (did you follow that?) seem to come alive only
 • because a group of people start to believe in these things' reality. For
 • something like *The Neverending Story* you can buy that premise and think it
 • is cute. But *Zod Wallop* is far from cute. Spencer deals with a surprising
 • number of icky social issues in the context of the fantasy he has devised,
 • and treats them in a thorough, well thought out manner. That would not be
 • enough to make me like this book as much as I do, but there has to be more
 • to it than the clinical. After all, no one would want to read an academic
 • treatise on things like the inhumane treatment of seemingly insane, largely
 • catatonic individuals. It would be boring, and perhaps incomprehensible.
 • Spencer leads you to these fronts by taking you through an amusement park
 • and insisting you ride the Big Rides. The novel is such a pleasure to read
 • because it is comic, witty, charming, exciting, and, at just the right
 • moments, deadly serious.

• William Browning Spencer has written a few other books and, after
 • reading *Zod Wallop*, I went out and bought them. That is not something I
 • often do. I must have *really* liked this book.

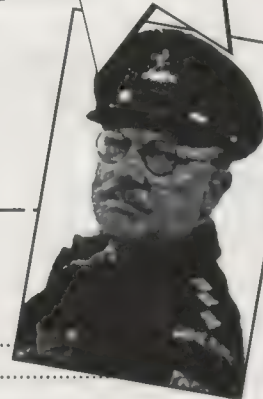
A View from the Colonies by Wayne Edwards

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MAY 9

When the island first showed itself as a formless dark blot on the shifting greys of sea and sky it should have been a moment full of significance, of boding...but my attention was elsewhere. One of its people is actually on this boat. And yes, and yes, she has something of what I have been calling the Droch Skerry 'look'. Besides that odd patchiness of the hair and the dark bruises under each eye, there are points only hinted by the newspaper photograph that first caught my curiosity months ago and on the far side of the Atlantic. A peaked unhealthiness, a greyish, shrunken aspect — well, it's hard to put in words.

Otherwise she would be an ordinarily attractive young woman. Her name is Lee something. "Just call me Lee. It'll be great to have a new face on the island." She's loaded with small oddments for people in the Droch Skerry community. Out here on the edge of the Shetlands, going shopping is a major expedition planned weeks ahead. We clung to an icy rail and made small talk on the heaving deck, surrounded by all her sprawling bags and parcels. Luckily I had already picked up a smattering of this alternative-energy lore from books bought *en route*.

For the record — and this casebook might as well carry a complete record — I would not have made the long journey for something as nebulous as a 'look'. Other sources (the UFO journals, the *Fortean Times*, even the *National Enquirer*) carry tales, recent tales, of this being a region where 'something fell out of the sky'. Maybe I am even the first to spot what might well be a significant nexus.

LATER

What a place. A lone bare lump in the ocean. Grey rock, damp concrete, mist and endless chill...they say that Spring comes early to the Scottish Islands but they must have meant some other islands.

And the alternative-technology angle! There are straggling windmill towers on the heights, both the ordinary and the

vertical-axis kind, flapping in a dispirited way; there are salt-crusted solar panels aimed up into the fog; the toilets are ideologically correct, and stink. Even the quay is low-tech, a sort of natural spit of rock humped like a brontosaurus and squared off with wobbly stonework, glistening and slippery from the spray; I nearly killed myself getting my suitcases to firm ground.

The commune was out in force to greet Lee and the shipment from the mainland. Their clash of fluorescent anoraks and cagoules looks cheerful enough until you come closer and see their faces. In various degrees, like Polaroid snaps frozen at twenty different stages of their development, they have that wasted look. Most are quite young.

Stewart Wheatley is the man I corresponded with before coming. He owns Droch Skerry, I think, and runs the commune by his own whims. They led me to him in one of their squat energy-saving houses, and he greeted me under a yellow light that waxed and waned with (I suppose) the wind overhead.

Is there a grey look about Wheatley too? Hard to tell in that pulsating light. He's big and completely bald, looks like a retired wrestler, has one of those arc-lamp personalities whose glare backs you up against the wall. He was throbblingly glad I'd come to join the group, insisted I must call him Stewart, everyone would call me Robert, no formalities on Droch, knew I'd get the most tremendous satisfaction from working alongside this truly dedicated team...

Somehow I never even got around to my carefully prepared story of research for a magazine article.

There was a meal: all twenty-odd of the islanders at one long table. We ate some sort of meat loaf from tins, wizened vegetables out of the grey salty garden plots I'd seen, and horribly naked shellfish that some of the team (a third of them seemed to be called Dave) had chipped laboriously from the rocks at low tide. Whelks, limpets,

some vile wrinkle things called buckies, and worse. It seemed impolitic to shut my eyes, but they looked as bad as anything described in the grimoires.

The stuff in the chipped tumblers tasted of lime-juice, and a bottle of multivitamin capsules went round the table like the port decanter at some old Oxford college...so a tentative theory of mine was abandoned. *Not* merely a case of deficiency disease. Good.

Conversation: subdued. They keep one eye on Wheatley, huge at the head of the table. I said, not strictly truthfully, that the shabby wind-farm was impressive.

"You should hear what they cost," said Lee at once with an edge in her voice. "Low technology is our watchword, Robert. We've set ourselves free from industrial civilization, except the bits that sell wind generators."

"Have to start somewhere," muttered a scanty-haired, haggard man who I gathered was called Rich.

Wheatley told me, "Lee would like us to live in caves and eat roots — Rich is disappointed that in five years we haven't yet covered the skerry with dams and refineries."

I asked him which he favoured, and he said rather grandly that he was an eco-opportunist who made the best use of whatever was available: money, weather, materials...

"Mussels," said a voice to my right, not with enthusiasm. "Eggs."

I do not know how to convey the chill that crept into that long, stuffy eating hall. Some seemed as puzzled as myself by the sudden silence; some looked sidelong at Wheatley as though expecting a cue.

"Dave," he said gently. "No, not you, *you*. I've just remembered...it's your turn to go on watch tonight."

The indicated Dave gave a small nod. Clearly it had not been his turn. It was a punishment. Disciplinary.

On watch? Where and for what?

LATER

Or might it conceivably be sickness after all? Wheatley alone has a private room. In the men's dormitory before lights-out, much pallid flesh was visible. Those with more pronounced cases of the 'look' seem to suffer unusually from bruises on their arms and legs — great piebald splotches.

Of the toilets I do not choose to write more. ("We return *everything* to the soil." The sooner the better. These people's digestive systems do not seem in good order.) The bathrooms are tolerable and give a few minutes' privacy to bring these notes up to date. How the heating systems are shared between the windmills, diesel generator and those joke solar cells remains a dark mystery, but after a tepid start the shower surprised me by running hot.

Tufts of thin hair lie on the floor, sticking to my wet feet. I have seen it coming out in wads on their combs.

In my locked suitcase there are certain signs and wards that may offer a little protection against...against? I have followed up some odd cults (not with any great success) in a dozen decayed holes of old Britain and New England, but have rarely known such a compelling sense of being *too close*.

MAY 10

Already I have to pay the price of offering myself as a willing worker. Today's choice is limpet-work on the western shore, or some nameless task involving a cranky and obstinate biomass converter which will one day heat the buildings with methane or blow them sky-high...or plain digging. That sounded the safest. Four hours scratching with an undersized fork at a vast tract of ground which was to blossom with yams, kiwifruit or something equally unlikely. Occasional jets thundered overhead according to the whim of the Royal Air Force, thick as flies in these 'remote' parts. Seagulls and scrawny hens pecked after me for worms. It offered time to think.

The impression I have is that the commune members who are further gone in the 'look' are those who have been here longer. Rich is one of the original few and has it very badly. He said hello just now, on his way to "look over the number-two windmill cable — it's leaking to earth." Not keen to have me come and see. "I get uptight if people watch me working."

I watched him scramble up the slope, though, up beyond the weak fingers of greenery that reach towards the central granite gnarl. The rocky climb is rotten with industrial archaeology: cable runs, abandoned scaffolding, the wreck of a windmill that hadn't been anchored right, pipes snaking this way and that to tap what I suppose must be freshwater springs. In one or two places there are ragged wisps of steam. A long scar of raw stone marks where Wheatley had (according to Lee) tried to blast the foundations for something or other. Rusty stains bleed down the rock. The place is a mess.

There were tolerant smiles for me when I staggered into the kitchen, aching and blistered, clammy with sweat despite the chill air. Lee and someone called Anna cracked age-old jokes about feeble city muscles; another of the Daves offered me soup hot from the midget electric stove that is another of Droch Skerry's compromises with self-sufficiency. There is a certain sardonic amusement in counting just how many compromises there are. Boxes and boxes of Kleenex tissues, not even recycled!

(But a tiny puzzle is lurking there too. Longer-standing members of the group will sometimes snatch a few tissues and turn aside from whatever is going on, not sneezing but quietly pressing the things to nose or mouth. Once or twice as the wadded-up tissue goes into the fire, I have thought to detect a splash of red.)

So I've worked for Droch Skerry and am halfway to being accepted. Coming a little way in makes one oddly sensitive to divisions further in, before you reach Wheatley and the centre. As though there were things which A and B might speak of together but not discuss with an outer circle of myself and Lee and half a dozen others.

MAY 11

Something fell out of the sky. The vague UFO rumours are sober truth.

In between work shifts it's quite allowable to go for a walk. "But when you know the place by heart," said Lee with half a smile, "the fun goes out of it rather."

Even in this eternal weeping mist, there ought not to be enough of Droch Skerry to become lost in. Its many granite shoulders are hunched and knotted, though; the grassy folds between them twist in a topologist's nightmare; the closer you look, the longer any journey becomes. Especially, of course, when you're not in the least sure what you hope to find.

Granite, gorse, granite, rabbit droppings, matted heather, gorse, granite, endlessly repeated...

It was in the tenth or twentieth coarse wrinkle of the ground that the irregular pattern seemed to break. Less of the prickly gorse here, perhaps, and more of it withered and brown? This fold of the island dipped further down than most, a long sheltered combe or glen that ended at a cliff over deep water. I pulled gingerly at the nearest dead gorse and it came up in my hand, roots long broken and dry. Then, coming to the edge of a roundish depression in the ground, I tripped over something like a doormat.

Not a doormat. A slab of turf that hadn't taken root. And next to it another, and another.

Part of the combe had been painstakingly re-turfed in chequerboard squares. Some of these turves had dried and died before they could knit into a smooth carpet of salt grass. When I stood back, the oval hollow in the ground rearranged itself in my mind's eye. It was a crater where something had impacted, hard, from very high up. One bulging granite rock nearby was marked with a bright smear of metal. I could imagine Wheatley's little workforce laboriously covering up what had happened, and...

What had it been and where was it taken?

The only further information I thought I could extract from this fold of the island was that — it seemed — a large and heavy bulk might have been dragged to or from the cliff edge. I had a hazy vision of something vast and formless rising from the sea, or returning to it.

Not long after, a dim shape along roughly those lines came looming out of the thin mist. It resolved itself into Wheatley, carrying a shotgun and the bloody rags of several rabbits strung into a bunch. The gun barrel wavered erratically, sometimes pointing at his own foot, or mine. "Our Rich catches the little buggers in humane snares," he said in a conversational tone, "but where's the challenge in that? You shouldn't come this way on your own. It's treacherous."

I had not found it so, and said something noncommittal.

"Believe me. See you've had a fall already."

It was ridiculous to feel guilty, trapped, as my eyes followed Wheatley's down to the muddy and grass-stained knees of my jeans. Was it so obvious that I'd spent time minutely studying the ground?

"Oh," he said, "and I should avoid the heights altogether. If I were you."

MAY 13

I constantly feel the circles within circles at these strange meals in that close, smelly room. (Deodorants do not seem to figure largely in the alternative life; no matter how often we all resort to the showers, we aren't a salubrious lot *en masse*.) There is what you might call a Lee faction which does not like relying on the dark gods of Western

industrial civilization even for microchips, paracetamol or the band-aids that decorate every other hand. The inner ring have a more Robinson Crusoe approach, feeling justified in snatching anything from the world's wreck as the pelagic deeps close over it. Sometimes they seem to be talking in code about some great and significant coup along these lines. "Power for the people," they say, and it means something more than an empty slogan. Wheatley watches over this with a curious air of controlled force, fraught with doom and significance, as though by lifting one finger he could abolish any of us. I think he may be an adept.

We are a democracy here and decide everything by show of hands, but suggestions not to the master's liking are never put to the vote. People change their minds in mid-proposal, turned by his pale gaze.

A special treat tonight: after some days' accumulation, the island's bedraggled hens have provided eggs all around. I never met boiled eggs so small and odd-tasting, but appetites here are small. Rich, who looked very bad tonight, collected a dozen half-shells and idly (it seemed, until I saw others' faces) arranged them on the table, unbroken end up, in a ring. A circle of power. It had some kind of power, because I saw Wheatley frowning like thunder. He rose early and the meal was over.

In the dormitory late on, eyes tight shut, I overheard a brief exchange. One of the Daves, the black one from Jamaica, was not looking forward to some coming night duty. "Man. Every hour on the hour. That light up there really genuinely gives me the creeps." He was answered, not quite intelligibly from where I lay in 'my' clammy bunk. But I believe a Name was pronounced. It is a central axiom of the old knowledge, of which I have learned so desperately little, that the forces that crawl under the thin bright reality we know all have their separate names, and may be called.

On watch. "Up there."

Avoid the heights.

MAY 16

Where does the time go? You can lose yourself in a community like this: hoeing, hunting for driftwood, carrying water in the 20-litre plastic drums that are comfortably liftable and an agony after thirty seconds' walk. There are a hundred running jokes about life here — away from the mainland, the job centre, the dole. Apart from the occasional strange no-go areas in conversation, I like these people.

But.

You can't get newspapers here, nor a decent steak or cup of coffee. We sit in a shivering circle around the radio and hear the pulse of the world, but see nothing. Lee says there is always going to be satellite TV on the skerry *next* month. It was a shock to leaf through mouldy old magazines stacked in the store-hut against some dim future notion of recycling, and be reminded of normal faces; of the fact that something on Droch is *wrong*, no matter how easily one becomes used to the ruined look people wear here. I ran, almost, to scan my own face in a shaving-mirror. Anxious and none too clean, but not (yet?) wearing that mark...

It is not lack of vitamins. Precautions are taken. It does not appear to be any of the legendary miscegenations of the literature — the notorious ‘Innsmouth look’ or the seal-man hybrids of Island folklore — but something subtler. These people have no lifelong roots here. From personal knowledge of a friend who died, I think it is not AIDS.

Tonight I plan to watch the watcher on the heights.

LATER

Bright light-bulbs indoors mean gales outside, the wind-mills screaming up above. Rather him than me.

In brief: when I heard the wind take the front door and slam it, I counted an interminable five minutes of seconds (“one and-a-pause, two and-a-pause, three and-a-pause”). Then I got up as naturally as possible and padded off towards the toilet. Out in the upper-floor passage, thick and smeary windows show part of the hillside behind the commune buildings; I hoped I might see a light.

To my surprise I saw it quite soon, a flicking torch beam that danced to and fro impatiently while its invisible source mounted the rocks with infinite slowness and care. Lack-ing survey equipment, I did what I could and knelt to watch one-eyed, chin on the deep window-ledge, tracing each position of the light by touching my pen to the window-glass. In the grey of morning the marks might show up and indicate a path, or not...

The light vanished. Surely it could not have reached and passed the crest? I waited another age, shivering in my pyjamas, and suddenly found the flicker again — now unmistakably descending.

A memory: “every hour on the hour,” I’d overheard. The watch was not a continuous one. Somehow this made it even odder and more disturbing.

MAY 17

After the usual unsatisfactory breakfast, the upstairs passage seemed full of comings and goings I’d never noticed before. I dodged guiltily to and fro, unable to be alone with my window; in the end I invented a story about a touch of diarrhoea (common enough here), and then felt I had to brood in the lavatory for the sake of verisimilitude each time.

Eventually I was able to squint from what I hoped was the right position, and see how the blurred smears of ink on the glass overlaid the hillside. The end of the dancing light’s journey must have been in *that* area, above the raw scar in the rocks, some way to the left of that tangle of old iron.

After a while I thought I saw a patch of black...an opening? The old places under the Earth. With a wholly disproportionate effect of dread, a wisp of fog seemed to trail from the blackness like dog’s breath on a chill morning.

I must record that I have played around with these investigations in libraries and ancient college archives, and have never before reached a position where the next logical step is to climb a hill in slippery darkness and crawl into a black cavity. I record that I am sick with fright.

Since I am officially frequenting the toilets, I’m thus today’s logical choice to carry all the buckets out for return to the soil and cleansing in the sea. As I trudged back

from the fourth trip Wheatley chose to waylay me and say, “You’re settling in nicely, Robert.” And as a seeming afterthought: “You should get more sleep at night.”

When next upstairs I remembered to wipe my felt-pen tracing from the window. If anyone had noticed, it could have meant nothing to them. Surely.

Light relief of the evening: Anna, who is interested in something called biodynamic gardening, said we should preserve our excrement, stuff it into sterilized cow horns and bury them at the winter solstice to be transmuted by cosmic and telluric forces. Dug up in Spring, minute quantities of the result would make Droch Skerry bloom like the garden of Findhorn. Wheatley laughed out loud and scoffed at her mercilessly. I noticed that Anna, like most of the women here, wears a headscarf all day long; it covers the thinning hair.

I judge that Lee will need a scarf soon. I *like* Lee. Something ought to be done about the shadow on this damned place.

Tonight, then.

LATER

Inventory. Plenty of Wellington boots, anoraks and electric torches for night emergencies, waiting in the big kitchen. A little shamefacedly I am wearing a scrap of parchment inscribed with certain elder signs, carrying a vial of powder compounded from a protective formula. One does not wholly believe in these things and yet they can offer comfort.

What do I expect to see? I don’t know. If there’s anything in sortilege, though, my eye fell today on a balloon in the Krazy Kat collection from our ramshackle library: “I sense the feel of evil — Every nerve of me vibrates to the symphony of sin — Somewhere, at this moment, crime holds revel.” That’s it.

MAY 18, AROUND 1:20AM

The cave mouth. It is a cave; could be natural. Water streams from it and is lost in the rocks. Warm water.

The climb was very bad; my shins must be bleeding in a dozen places. Bitter wind. I think it was Rich making the every-hour-on-the-hour visits at midnight and one. Plenty of time before two. Keep telling myself, Rich and several others have stared again and again into whatever abyss waits there, and come out unscathed.

Except for the worrying way they *look*...

SHORTLY AFTER

Have to stoop slightly and splash my way. Firm underfoot except when I trip over the ubiquitous pipes. A warm breath blowing from further in, a seaside reek. There seems to be a bend ahead, and a hint of blue light when I click off the torch. “That light gives me the creeps.” The hiss and moan of the wind in the cave mouth drowns out another sound ahead, I think; in the lulls it seems to be a faint...bubbling?

LATER

I cannot get over that terrible glare he gave me at the last.

The chamber might be natural, and the spring that pours into it, but the deep, brimming pool is surely not. (I remembered those scars of abortive blasting activities.) The pool holds something bleak and alien. All in a ghostly blue light.

There are things down there, eight things like great eggs, each the size of a man's skull, suspended in a complex cradle of ropes anchored to the stony floor around the rim...a precisely spaced ring of devil's eggs, a diagram of power, a gateway? All around them the water glows in deadly blue silence. Bubbles rise from them, every bubble a blue spark, the whole pool fizzing and simmering. Thick, choking warmth in the air.

One half-remembered phrase kept writhing through my mind like a cold worm: '*...a congeries of iridescent globes...*' It was a long while before I could even look away from the incomprehensible blue horror that held me with a snake's gaze.

A rack of rust-caked tools: hammer, chisel, knife. More coils of rope. A prosaic notebook hanging from a nail on the wall, damp pages full of scribble in different handwritings. '17/5 0100 OK no adjust — R'. I shuddered most of all at the innocent-looking pipe that led away, and down the slope outside, towards the houses.

Then I heard the scraping down the passageway and knew that I was caught. Beyond the troubled pool the floor and roof became a wedge-shaped niche for dwarfs, and after that nothing at all.

Wheatley, gigantic in this low-ceilinged space, was not carrying the shotgun as carelessly as he had in the open. I backed away uselessly over granite slippery and treacherous with condensation.

"You probably know already: no one can climb up here after dark without showing a light to half the island," he said reasonably, pacing my slow retreat around the pool. "Now what are we going to do with you?"

"What is that monstrosity? What force makes the light?" I said, or something of the sort.

"A very well-known one. Never heard of Cherenkov radiation? Nor me, but Rich understands all this stuff. My God, can't you imagine how we felt when that Eurostealth bomber came down smash on top of Droch Skerry? Over the cliff with it, except for the cores, and there they are. Talk about swords into ploughshares, talk about power for the people. We might have had some leakage trouble early on, but we're the first community with its own alternative-technology reactor. Piping-hot water for all our showers, all our..."

I understood only that in his raving he had allowed the gun barrel to wander again. The plastic phial of Ibn Ghazi powder was in my hand by then; logically I should have cast it into the accursed waters, but I threw it at Wheatley instead. Common salt, sulphur, mercury compounds; all more or less harmless, but perhaps it had some virtue, and he caught it in the eyes. With a not very loud grunt he lurched off-balance, the shotgun fired and rock chips exploded from the floor, the recoil (I think) took him over backwards, and his head struck hard on a spur of granite as he splashed into the warm seething water.

I could not bring myself to dive after him. The sinking body spun lazily down towards the terrible eggs and their aura of hellish radiance. For an instant Wheatley's whole face glowed translucent blue, and the light somehow filled his eyeballs, a final unseeing glare at me from eyes that were discs of blue fire. Then he floated slowly to the surface and became a lumpish silhouette against the evil light below. He no longer moved.

It must be stopped. This rot, this ulcer, this tumour in the clean rock. The circle of 'cores' lets in something bad from outside the world we know. Break the circle. Break the symmetry.

The old knife from the rack haemorrhages wet rust at every touch, but it has the remnants of an edge beneath. Hack through the ropes and the strange eggs will no longer be arranged in that terrible sigil; they'll sink and nestle together in a ragged bunch at the bottom of the water. Whatever esoteric contract is fulfilled by that careful spacing will be broken apart.

The logic cannot be faulted. I don't know why I find myself hesitating.

MAY 2?

It is very hard to write now. Around dawn they found me half-conscious on the rocky hillside. I suppose I slipped and fell. My nerve had failed me as the loosed eggs glowed hotter, cracked as though about to hatch, while raw steam erupted from the foaming pool. By the time I'd stumbled to the cave mouth there was a superheated blast in pursuit: dragon's breath. The rest of that bad night has sunk out of memory, apart from jags of pain. RAF helicopters came clattering down in the morning light to investigate the tall plume of steam and something else that still wound snakelike into the sky.

"Jesus Christ, we've got our own Chernobyl," I heard one of the uniformed crowd say.

The mark of Droch Skerry is fully on me now. My hair flees by handfuls, I bleed too easily, food is hateful and fever sings in my blood. Lee has visited me, and wept. Wheatley's tomb is said to be sealed with a monstrous plug of concrete. That is not dead which can eternal lie. They say the others can nearly all be saved. To one or two I am a kind of hero. They say.

I still do not wholly understand...

SERPENT EGGS by DAVID LANGFORD

DAVID LANGFORD has sold sixty-odd stories, hundreds of articles and columns, and (depending how you count) some twenty books and chapbooks, ranging from the romantic comedy of *War in 2080: The Future of Military Technology* (1979) through the nightmarish, soul-destroying horrors of *The Unseen University Challenge: Terry Pratchett's Discworld Quizbook* (1996) to the slam-bang space opera of his 80,000-word editorial contribution to the Clute/Grant *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997). *The Leaky Establishment* (1984), a barely disguised autobiography covering Langford's days as a weapons physicist, has a thematic link with 'Serpent Eggs' which he hopes no one will notice. In August 1997 he won his fourteenth Hugo Award.

LIFE, MARS & EVERYTHING

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S MARS TRILOGY



The trilogy *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, *Blue Mars* is the outstanding 'hard' science fiction achievement of recent years. This article is not a comprehensive critique, nor does it attempt a resumé. It aims to illustrate how the novel (and Kim Stanley Robinson himself regards the three novels as a unity), over and above fictionalising the colonisation and terraforming of a planet, moves into larger human, historical, and even mythic dimensions, and how these are often explored through metaphoric imaging and symbolic structuring.

In his three 'Orange County' books, which preceded *Red Mars*, Kim Stanley Robinson was concerned with the several directions in which human (more precisely, post-capitalist American) history might go, and specifically with the ways in which 'utopia' (democratic, ecological) might be denied, subverted or sustained. The trilogic structure of his Martian novel, however, pursues a continuous process, each successive phase of which is marked by a revolution. A major structural ploy is indicated by the three titling adjectives — Red, Green and Blue. In their oppositions and complementarities they are suggestive of dialectical versions of history where oppositional stages may be followed by, or be resolved in, a synthesis. Most such schemata have a deterministic flavour, but that proposed in the trilogy, far from being mechanical, tends towards the vitalistic. This is reflected in the metahistory of the Martian historiographer Charlotte Dorsa Brevia. According to her, a democracy is being established on Mars which has emerged from the terrestrial capitalist age, which had itself contained oppositional elements of a residual feudalism and a nascent democracy. The Martian (22nd Century) democratic age is one in which a residual capitalism clashes with an emergent order, thought of as a possible utopian harmony. The socio-political situation depicted in *Blue Mars* is one of a fundamental shift in balance, favouring human survival beyond the population crisis. In the process of that phase-shift, 'the flowering civilisation included not only the solar system beyond Mars, but the inner planets as well. [...] A stressed renaissance, then, living fast, on the edge, a manic golden age: the Accelerando. And no one could say what would happen next'.

That final sentence is very significant when the three-term schema is given a time embodiment: that is, if the first term is oriented largely towards a human heritage, the second towards a turbulently changing scene, and the third towards humankind's future. René Guenon, the French symbolist, has, in *The Great Triad*, associated the past with 'necessity' and the future with 'freedom'. In such a light, one may see the action of *Red Mars* as being much concerned with the combating of physical conditions and Earth-derived historical inertia (necessity); the action of *Green Mars* with the further conflicts arising out of terraforming/areoforming; and that of *Blue Mars*, where a generational transition is most marked, with a freedom to shape 'what would happen next'.

These 'open' possibilities and initiatives of the 'Blue' stage are manifested in two main directions. The first entails Mars abjuring war with acquisitive Earth, which makes possible a new concordat with that stricken home planet, where from the old terrestrial feudal/capitalist mélange fresh waves of settlers are coming to Mars. The second sets off a new 'diaspora' from Mars. An active character in that outward movement is Jackie Boone,

KV Bailey

granddaughter of the 'First Hundred' settler and leader John Boone. She defines the synthesis attainable in *Blue Mars* when she says: 'We terraform the planet, but the planet areoforms us'. She says further: 'Mars is all I care about. I was brought up in a culture made of strands from many different Terran predecessors, mixed to a new Martian thing'. Yet, as the First Hundred survivors become senescent, and as more of Earth's surplus populate Mars, it is she who is foremost in the exodus of younger Martians to colonise an identified suitable planet in the Aldebaran system. There is a circularity in the situation as the historian Charlotte Dorsa Brevia diagnoses it: 'And if you think of Mars as being the new democratic society and Earth the old feudalism, then the influx [from Earth] can look like the old trying to crush the new. [...] So a group of them are doing it. Families, family groups, childless couples, childless single people. It's like the First Hundred going to Mars...'

How far in all this is the actual triple symbolism of colour significant? Red is the natural colour of the planet, and among the quasi-political parties on Mars the Reds hold the unspoilt planet sacrosanct, believing that terraforming should be checked, and exploitation for Earth's economic needs resisted. The Martian Greens are not conservationists of the native landscape; rather the opposite. They are pro-terraforming, or areoforming, active to bring the water from deep aquifers which will spread a green mantle over the deserts. Yet they, too, are idealists. As one of them, in *Green Mars*, reflects: '[We are] driven by the green force, alive with spirit, the great unexplainable!' The Greens call this force 'viriditas' finding it to operate in tree and flower; and Kim Stanley Robinson often uses such imagery when writing of the blossoming of democratic systems, the flowering of a civilisation and the dispersal of its seeds.

A passage where the symbolism of the colours is made most explicit occurs in *Blue Mars*, where the two veterans Sax and Maya engage in playfully matching environmental observations of colour against the classifications of colour chart and colour wheel. They find the subtlety of atmospheric colours to outstrip classification and vocabularies, but they identify what they call Martian Orange as close to Oxide Red — a colour eloquent of oxygen's affinity for iron. Red and Green are oppositely placed on a colour wheel, as imperceivable as components of the same colour; but in practice there are red-green mixes, such as madder alzirin. As the two talk over possible political analogies, the light over the mountains changes and almost achieves that Marine blue which embodies some red. The metaphors are taken up again when Sax and Ann Clayborne, the stubborn 'Red' scientist, are climbing and camping on Olympus Mons. The setting could not be more symbolic: below, a terraformed scene of flowering oases, green valleys and alluvial estuaries; above the 27-kilometre high caldera walls, a sky of that dark Marine blue, in which stars are visible; all around, 'the fundamentals: rock, sand, dust' of Mars's pristine terrain, a red overlay to the dark basalt.

Leaving now these colour tropes, I want to look at a different motif which accumulates considerable metaphoric power: the escalator. Before the end of *Red Mars*, an asteroid, suitably christened Clarke, has been brought into Mars orbit to act as a space port, the connecting cable and escalator cars terminating on the equatorial Peacock Mountain (Mons Pavonis). It is an ambivalently valuable umbilicus, the link with parent Earth, a parent both sustainer and predator, a threat or a dependent. It provides the way of entry into Mars for both fresh colonists and the exploiting transnational powers, and as such it is inevitably caught up in the revolts of the Red conservationists. As a symbol it accrues a whole spectrum of allusive resonances. When the cable descends on Mars from Clarke, it is described as 'a black tree trunk, taller than the sky', and, as it is clamped into its socket, variously as 'a very tall black spire' and 'a beanstalk'; and, with even more mythological reference, as having 'sprung into being like Athena'. Athena was born bursting from the head of Zeus,

• hence that metaphor implies godlike and generative attributes to Clarke, this in its aspect as Earth surrogate. The beanstalk metaphor suggests access to giant, yet dangerous, resources. The sky-high tree trunk image evokes that of the Tree of Life, which in alchemical and cabbalistic lore provides channels of emanation or descent from superior realms, and ascending paths for the spiritualised man (cf. the 'Jacob's Ladder' images of many iconographies). On Mars we soon find from emigrant ships 'a continuous stream of people docking on Clarke, descending in elevator cars, and debarking on the socket', while 'on the other side of the cable, upbound elevator cars were being loaded with refined metals, platinum, gold, uranium and silver'.

• One thing that the cable does bring down and reinforce is Earth's multitude of bureaucrats — and their police who are exerting a grip on Mars intolerable to the Reds. When giants are coming down the beanstalk, what happens? A key action in the revolt that breaks out is the saboteurs' bombing of the cable connection to Clarke, which causes the cable to fall through thirty-seven thousand kilometres to the surface of Mars, wrapping itself like a burning snake around the planet's equator. Kim Stanley Robinson's account of this contains some of *Red Mars*'s most metaphoric imagery. In Mars's atmosphere 'the burning graphite had stripped away first, leaving an incandescent double helix of diamond, flowing majestically out of a sunset sky'. Although it was the gravestone of all who had then been travelling the elevator, it was also 'utterly strange and beautiful, a vision of some kind of fantasy DNA, DNA from a macroworld made of pure light, plowing into our universe to germinate a barren planet'.

• These metaphors of death and of life created or renewed echo through the narration of the revolution's failure, until, at the conclusion of *Red Mars*, refugees of the First Hundred are assembled in a south polar retreat, the domain of the dissident, shamanistic Hiroko, a vast, flowering under-ice cavern warmed by thermal waters, and iconically the very antithesis of the space-penetrating elevator. Here, Hiroko, a bio-farmer, has nurtured a new

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON IN ANTARCTICA



brood and breed of children. The volume's last line is: "This is home," said Hiroko. "This is where we start again."

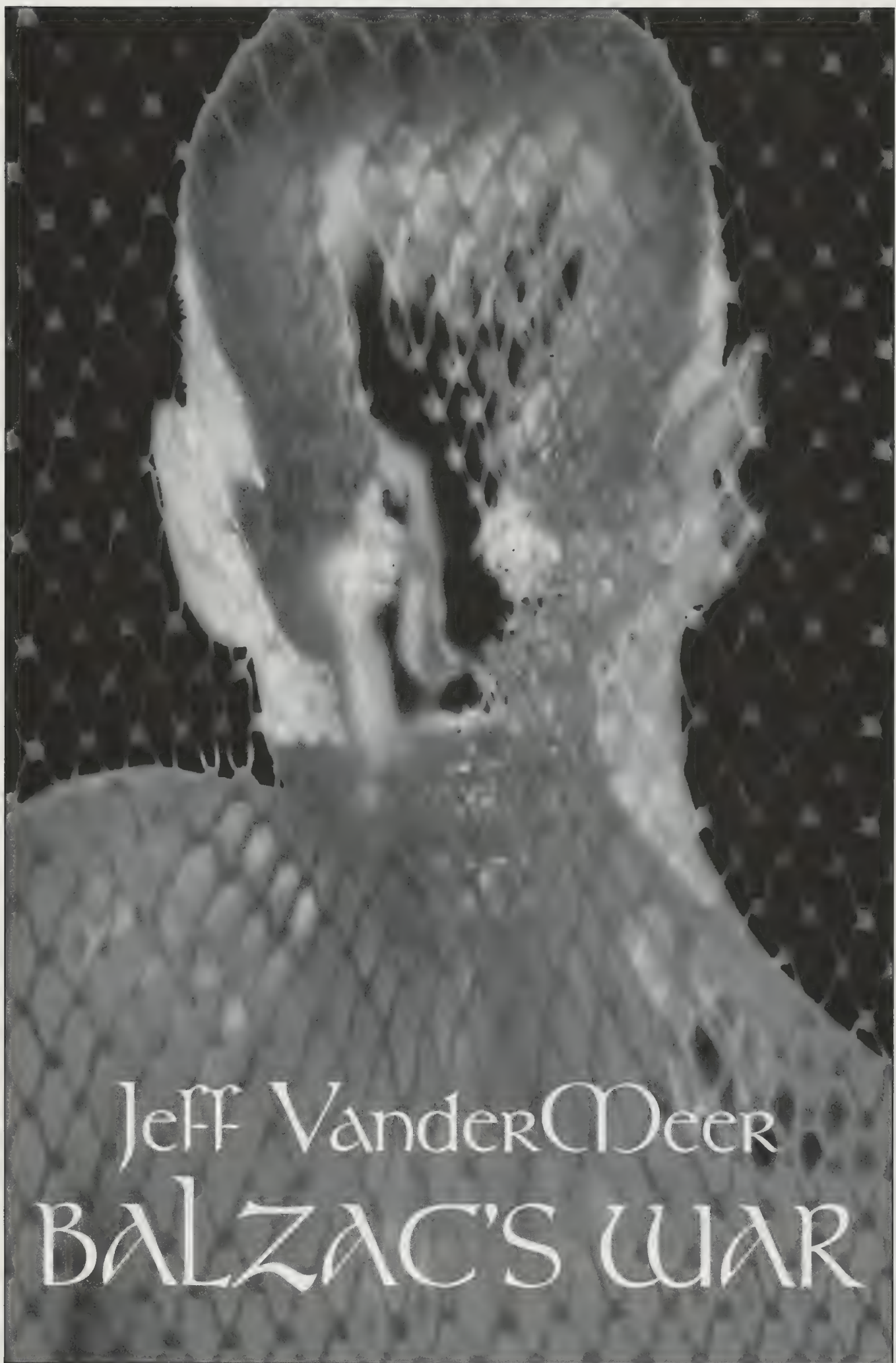
In *Green Mars*, while in Hiroko's domain thoughts and plans for renewal and for subsequent action are forged, the transnationals, manoeuvring into areosynchronous orbit a second asteroid, New Clarke, restore the elevator. 'It was as though an umbilical cord had been retied'. To those watching the first descent of the cable it was as though 'a thin fishing line [was] being trawled by some gods in the next universe up'. The tenor of *Green Mars*, an indication carried through into *Blue Mars*, and, in fact, definitively stated by Robinson in interview (*Foundation* #68), is that Mars cannot flourish, cannot achieve its innovative and evolutionary potential, if Earth is ailing; but as Mars becomes more adequately terraformed, more livable-on, and more independent, the inherent tensions, the peace/war oppositions and decisions remain acute.

A character whose thought and experiences are paradigmatic of the Earth/Mars situation throughout the three volumes is the psychologist, Michel Duval. It is in his reductions that Robinson gives form to his most sophisticated symbolism. Michel attains striking insights by mentally mulling over diagrammatically ordered dichotomies — 'semantic rectangles' so patterned that the relationships of likes and unlikes are clarified in terms of both polarity and complementarity. At the height of the turmoil of *Green Mars*, for example, when the logistics of forming a Martian government are being considered, Michel formulates a violence and non-violence, terraforming and anti-terraforming rectangle, and to the corners of an embracing secondary rectangle moves the various sects and interests into meaningful positions. Michel is a Provencal, perpetually mindful of his beautiful terrestrial birthplace, always seeking its possible mirror and counterpart on alien Mars, and finding it, first in his adherence to Hiroko's 'areophanies' and, as through the decades of *Green Mars* transforming life spreads, in the metamorphoses that are taking place. At one point he meditates on how in French philosophy — Descartes, Sartre, Teilhard de Chardin — attempts have recurred to bind oppositions into such structures as the semantic rectangle. The meditation leads him towards the dazzling image of 'a green electric snap between rock and mind', and to a concept of his fellow Martians as young gods with alchemical powers, each one a 'new Paracelsus' of whom one might wonder 'whether he would turn lead to gold, or cause rocks to blossom'. It is just such a sudden insight as the one that he had experienced early in *Red Mars* when, taking part for the first time in one of Hiroko's areophanic rituals, the complex rectangular *combinatoire* he had been pondering suddenly resolved itself — all rectangles, all antimonies 'collaps[ing] to a single, beautiful rose, the heart of the areophany, [...] both fully red and fully green at one and the same time'.

This brings us back to the structural colour symbolism discussed at the outset of this essay. There are many other metaphoric strands not considered here — that of the Phoenix, for example, which follows Michel's 'Rose' experience (and which, like it, chimes with the images of renewal in Eliot's *Four Quartets*). There is also the metaphoric mileage gained by apt association of certain characters with mythic personages: Phyllis (as Queen of the Escalator) with Athene; Hiroko with both Ceres and Persephone; the elusive, mysterious, appearing and disappearing agitator Coyote with Mercury. All those familiar with the trilogy will know, of course, that its mode for the greater part is one of realism in scene, character and science, but I have hoped to show here how further and far-penetrating dimensions are opened up by Kim Stanley Robinson's intuitive and poetically imaginative application of narrative structure and his use of resonant symbol and metaphor.

Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel *Antarctica*, a gripping eco-thriller based on fact but set in the near future, was published in hardback by HarperCollins on 25th September 1997, price £16.99.

Next issue **KV BAILEY** focuses on particular themes in the fiction of Storm Constantine.



Jeff VanderMeer

BALZAC'S WAR

I

Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.
Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill'

BALZAC AND JAMIE STUMBLED UPON THE FLESH dog on a day when the sky, seared white as bleached bone, split open the world and allowed any possibility. Sixteen and free of the creche, two as one, they ran across the desert floor to the ruined city of Balthakazar.

Balzac sucked air as he tried to match her long strides, his tunic and trousers billowing in the wind as if he were a human sail. Just ahead of him he could see Jamie's tangles of black hair snarling out behind her, her burnished mahogany thighs pumping beneath the flurry of white dress plaited at the knee and drawn up between her legs. Within hours his older brother and self-proclaimed guardian, Jeffer, would track them down and, returning them to the creche, force them to complete their lesson with the boring old water dowser, Con Fegman. No doubt Con Fegman was, at that very moment, recounting for the thousandth time how he had discovered the oasis lakes with a mere twitch-twitch of his fingers.

Ahead, the ruins shimmered in the heat, the dark metallic glints of edges and curves beginning to resolve into cracked causeways, broken down battlements, and crooked buildings fifty storeys high. The city had in its demeanour, the sand ever in motion across its metal and concrete carapace, a sense of watchfulness, a restlessness.

At the fringe, where buildings slept like bald and eyeless old men, they found an ancient highway; it shook itself free from the sand as if from a dream of drowning. Once, it might have been eighteen lanes wide, but now, choking on sand, it could fit only four abreast.

Breathing hard, Balzac slowed to a walk. Sweat dripped down his face. A delicious nervousness pierced his stomach.

Jamie, hardly winded, turned her face out of the sun.

"Why did you stop?"

"Because," Balzac wheezed, "*this* is the city..."

Husks and shells, as dead as the hollowed-out, mummified corpses of tortoises and jackals after a drought: the idea of 'city' stripped down to its most fundamental elements, the superfluous flourishes of paint, writing, road signs, windows, scoured away in an effort to reveal the unadorned and beautifully harsh truth. Gutted weapons embankments pointed toward the sky, but could not defend the city from the true enemy.

Jamie interrupted his reverie. "Don't just *stand* there — we've got to hurry. Your brother will find us soon."

He held out his hand.

She stared at it for a moment, then took it. Her palm felt flushed and warm.

"I'll deal with Jeffer," he said with new-found confidence, although as he led her forward he didn't dare to see if she was impressed or just amused.

Straight to the city's heart they went, the buildings encroaching on the highway, while beneath their feet, four o'clocks, cactus blossoms, and sedgeweeds thrust up through cracks in the highway pavement. Scuttling

through these miniature oases, anonymous grey lizards waged a war with coppery metal scorpions that pursued with mechanical implacability, their electric stingers singing static to the wind. Con Fegman had shown them one cracked open: beneath the metal exterior lay the red meat of flesh and blood.

Balzac loved even this most deadly part of the mystery that was Balthakazar. All the creche machines — heirlooms from centuries past — broke down regularly and had to be cannibalized to repair other machines, and yet the Con members did nothing. Even practical Jeffer must realize that some day there would be no machines at all. Some day only the dormant technologies of the city would save them.

"Look at the bones," Jamie said, and pointed at the ground. Scattered across the highway were whitish-grey shards. It made Balzac shiver to think about it. Bones did not fit his pristine, cold-metal vision of Balthakazar in its prime.

"How do you know it's bone? It could be plastic or mortar, or almost anything."

"It's bone. Why else do you think the Con members don't move us back into the city. Why they don't even want us to visit?"

"Because, at night *creatures* come out of the underground levels, *things* with sharp teeth, and they *eat* you."

Jamie threw her head back and laughed; Balzac could see the smooth skin of her neck and marvelled at its perfection even as he blushed and said, "It's not funny." Yet even her laughter pleased him.

"You," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "I stopped believing in that old tale a long time ago."

Something in his expression must have given him away, because she shocked him by saying, gently, "I'm sorry about your parents — really, I am — but the only truth is this," and she bent to pick up a shard that might have been bone. "My father says no one knows what did this. If these are just old graves opened by the sands or if something killed them all off." She paused, looked at him oddly, as if weighing her options, then said, "My father brought me here when I was much younger, and I just liked the texture of the bones. I didn't know what they were. All I knew was that they felt good to touch — lightweight and with those porous grooves — and that my father was there with me after so many nights away from the creche, showing me something that filled him with awe." She tossed the shard aside. "It's only bits of bone, anyhow. Whatever happened happened a long time ago. There's nothing to be done for them."

True enough, and it was a reassurance to know that the years had created a barrier between him and the bones, so he could look at them as curious reminders of another age. How many times had Con Fegman, or even Jeffer, retold the old legends from before the collapse of the cities, as if the mere repetition would fend off the spirits of the dead?

"Come on," Balzac said. "Let's go." This time he did not hold her hand.

The pavement became hot, cool, then hot again as the sun sliced through the spaces between structures. The landscape had changed, become both rougher and

smoother until buildings were all edges or had no edges at all. Others gleamed with an odd hint of self-repair, their skins smooth and shiny.

They encountered the hull of a rusted hovercraft over which, looking like a weathered lizard, lay the leathery, discarded skin of a dirigible. Balzac did not recognize the faded creche insignia on the wrinkled cloth. Near the hovercraft lay a misshapen rock, as tall as two or three autodocs. The top of the rock was black and shiny.

"Let's sit down for a moment," Balzac said.

"If you must."

"I must. And besides, it's not just to rest. I've got leeches fruit."

They climbed up onto the rock and lay down on its smooth surface. He handed her a leeches and bit into his own, the juice dribbling down his chin. The fruit helped to rejuvenate him and he soon became acutely aware of her rising and falling chest, the sharp lines of her legs, the faint musk of sweat. She ate the leeches in huge bites, ignoring the juice as it trickled down her neck and stained her dress.

The rock was warm and it relaxed him to lie there, so close together. Confidence rising, he tried to explain why the city intrigued him so. He spoke of its rich history, how it must be considered the home of their ancestors, how it used structural designs and technologies unknown to the creche.

Propped up on one shoulder, Jamie gave him no encouragement. He stuttered, groping for the words that might unlock a true sense of mystery, of scale.

Stymied, he started all over again, afraid that when he opened his mouth, the words would come out jumbled and senseless.

"The city is alive."

"But it isn't," she said. "It's dead."

"But you're so wrong. I mean, you *are* wrong." He squinted at the city's outline until his eyes burned. "I see these buildings and they're like dozens of individual keys, and if I can turn enough of the keys, the city resurrects itself. Take that thing there." He pointed to a rectangular patch of sand dotted with eroded stone basins and bounded by the nubs of walls. "That's not just a box of sand. That used to be a garden or a park. And take that strip." He pointed to a slab of concrete running down the middle of the highway. "That wasn't just a divider for traffic lanes — that was a plot of plants and grass."

"You mean that you see the city as if it were organic."

"Yes! Exactly! And if I can rebuild the city, you could bring back the plants and the trees, flesh out the skeleton. There's a water source here — there must be — how else could the land support a city? In the old books, if you look, you'll see they used plants for decoration."

"Plants for decoration," she said slowly, hesitantly. Then she lay back down against the rock.

His heart pounded against his rib cage. He had made her see it, if only for a moment.

A silence settled over them, the sun making Balzac lazy, the leeches fruit a coolness in his stomach.

After a time, Jamie said, "No rain for at least a month."

"How do you know?"

"The water dowsers' last lesson — don't you remember, stupid?" She punched his shoulder. "Look at the clouds. They're all thin and stretched out, and no two are grouped together."

Balzac shielded his eyes against the sun and examined the clouds. At the edge of his vision, he thought he saw a series of black slashes.

"What are those?"

Jamie sat up. "I see them. They look like zynagill."

The scavenger birds circled an area east of the highway. Balzac shivered and stood quickly.

"Maybe we should go back now. Maybe if we find Jeffer before he finds us he won't be as angry."

But a sudden intensity and narrowness had crept over Jamie's features — a stubborn look Balzac had seen many times before. It was the look she wore in class when she disagreed with her teacher. It was the look she wore with her friends when they wanted to do something she didn't want to do.

"No," she said. "No. We should go see what they've found." She shimmied down the side of the rock, folded her arms, and stared up at him. "Well?"

Balzac stood atop the rock for several seconds, his pulse rapid, the weal of sky and sun burning above while all around lay the highway, littered with bones. Only when he looked into Jamie's eyes and realized she doubted him did he move; even then he hesitated, until she said, "If you don't go, I'm going alone."

She held out her hand. Her palm was calloused from hard work. He grasped it awkwardly, leaning against her compact weight as he jumped down off the rock. As they came together, her lips brushed his cheek; where she had kissed him the skin tingled and flushed bright red. He could smell her hair, was caught between its coolness and the heat of her lips.

But she was already moving away from him and before he could react, she shouted, "Catch me if you can!" and sprinted down the highway, smiling as she looked back over her shoulder.

He stood there for a moment, drunk with the smell and feel of her. When he did begin to run, she had a lead of more than a city block. Even worse, she didn't so much thread her way through the fields of broken stone as charge through them, leaping curved girders as blithely as if playing coddleskatch back at the creche. To see her run for the joy of it, careless of danger, made him reckless too, and as much as his nature would allow he copied her movements, forgetting the zynagill and their destination; watching only her.

Balzac had gained so much ground that he bumped into her when she finally stopped running.

A mountain of sand rose above them. Vaguely pyramid-shaped, it buttressed the sides of a massive amphitheatre. Balzac could just see, at the top of the sandpile, winged phalanges curling out from the circular lip. Above, the zynagill wheeled, eyeing them suspiciously.

Jamie moved away from Balzac. She pointed at the sand and bent to one knee. Balzac knelt beside her, saw what she saw: an outline in the sand, seven times larger than his own palm, so large that at first he didn't realize it was

a pawprint. A greenish-purple fluid had congealed inside the pawprint. Several more indentations followed the first, leading up the side of the amphitheatre, gradually obscured by a huge swath of sand where a heavy body had dragged itself forward.

Jamie traced the paw's outline and sand fell inward.

"Whatever it is, it's hurt," Balzac said. "Probably dangerous. We should wait for Jeffer."

"No. Let's at least walk up to the top and see if we can find it." Jamie softened the rebuke with another dazzling smile that made his ears buzz.

Helpless, Balzac took her hand when she offered it. He let her lead him as they trudged up the slanted wall of sand, parallel to the purple trail until, his sense of balance nearly betraying him, his muscles aching, they stood at the lip, blasted by the sudden wind.

He looked out across the city. Now, finally, it revealed the mystery of its structure: a broken pattern of radial spikes piercing to a centre to the southeast, obscured by the sun and the distance. The sight confounded him, and he almost lost his balance for a second time. No longer did he have to fill in the gaps with his imagination. The buildings at the centre of the spokes, those would have to be governmental or administrative in purpose; this would explain their archaic shapes, the arches and the domes. The remains of one- to three-storey buildings immediately north of the centre had to be the former homes of the city's leaders. Each revelation led to another until he forgot his chapped lips, the grumblings of his stomach, and the beast. He could have stood there forever, linking the city's streets in his mind, but Jamie tugged on his arm and pointed down, into the amphitheatre.

"Look," she said.

The amphitheatre had concentric circles of seats, most nubs of plastic and metal. Railings trailed off into open space while a series of gap-toothed entranceways spiralled down into the circle of what had at one time been a stage but now could only be called a hundred-meter-wide depression. At its centre a large, black hole spiralled farther downward. Halfway between the edge of the stage and the hole lay a dark shape, onto which the zynagill, leathery wings aflap, would land and then relaunch themselves. Not a single zynagill used its double-edged beak to saw at the flesh.

"It's some kind of animal," Balzac said. "And it's dead. Satisfied?"

Jamie stared at him, then peered into the amphitheatre again, as if weighing his unease against the mystery of the beast.

"Jeffer needs to see this," she said. "It might be important to the creche."

"He'll just get mad at us."

"You worry too much," Jamie said. "Stay here — I'm going down."

"Wait," he said, but he was already climbing down into the amphitheatre because he knew he couldn't stop her.

By the time they reached the stage, Balzac noted with satisfaction that Jamie was breathing hard. A thin layer of sand covered the stage, broken only by the animal's purple-tinged drag marks. Jamie ran forward. Balzac followed

cautiously behind. The zynagill loitered, their leathery hooded heads bobbing nervously, then rose as one, the rasp of their wings, the sudden cry of alarm, making Balzac think he saw movement from the body itself.

The body lay on its side, heavy flanks rising to the height of Balzac's chest. A dog. Coarse, black fur covered the body and the legs, sparser only at the paws, which ended in dulled double-edged hooks. The jowly, horrific head ran into a muscular, thick neck that disappeared into the torso without delineation between the two. The head lay against the ground and from the open mouth the purple tongue lolled, running over fangs longer and more numerous than Balzac's fingers. A pool of green and purple liquid had congealed near the mouth. The dog's eyes, staring blankly into the far wall of the amphitheatre, shared the purple tint of the tongue, although they were partially hidden by loose flaps of skin; these same flaps camouflaged a bulbous knot of tissue, twice as large as a clenched fist, that jutted from the forehead. The beast could not have died more than an hour previous and yet it had an unnatural, almost mechanical, stiffness. The curled, taut quality of the limbs made him wonder how it could have walked or run. He had a sudden, chilling image of the creature dragging itself across the desert floor. The thought of the creature crippled disturbed him more than the thought of it whole.

Jamie knelt beside the forepaws. She took one paw in her hands. "It's raw."

Five pads formed the underside of the paw. The pads had been worn to redness and the sides of the paw were as smooth as wind-washed stone.

"This beast travelled a long way just to die here. I wonder where it came from — another city or maybe even from beyond the desert. How could anything with such thick fur come from the desert?"

"It looks dangerous to me."

"It's dead, Balzac."

"Even so."

Balzac's gaze travelled the length of the creature and beyond until, lightheaded with dread, he realized the beast's destination: the hole. The hole that must spiral down into level beneath level, threading its way through catacombs without number, musty and old, where lived the creatures from nightmare.

"Jamie. Jamie, we should go. We should find Jeffer."

"Too late now. He'll find us." She did not bother to look up, but held the paw gently in her hand. "Such a distance to travel."

The sun beat down, hot and withering. It stung Balzac's eyes and brought beads of sweat dripping onto the bridge of his nose. But, despite the sun, the creature had no smell, no stench of decay. This creature had padded across the desert, the mountains, perhaps, and seen things Balzac could only imagine, and it had had the singleness of purpose to head for the darkest hole it could find when its legs had begun to give out...and it had no smell.

He wanted to run, to finally leave Jamie behind if she insisted on being so foolish. But, foolish or not, she was right: it was too late, for at that moment Jeffer appeared above them, staring down from the lip of the amphitheatre.

II

It seems to him there are a thousand bars,
and behind the bars, no world.
Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The Panther'

TEN YEARS AFTER THE AMPHITHEATRE, ON THE

forty-eighth night of the war for Balthazar, Jeffer saw Jamie for the last time and his mind wobbled strangely. He stood on the third storey balcony of the crumbling, baroque building he had chosen as a resting place for his men, but seeing her he was suddenly adrift, the stone beneath his feet shockingly porous, apt to fall apart and spill him onto the street below. Seeing her, he could not help but curl inward, downward, into a spiral of memories, surfacing only much later to the implications of her existence below him. Almost in self-defense, his thoughts circled back to the one ritual that had proven impervious to change: when he slept in those years before and after the amphitheatre, he would dream of the oasis lakes reflecting the stars. In his dreams, the lakes transformed themselves to light-choking, frictionless surfaces, as motionless as, as smooth as, lacquered black obsidian, the stars that fell upon the lakes screaming down like shards of broken, blue-tinted glass. Other times, the lakes became the land and the surrounding desert metamorphosed into thick, churning oceans through which swam fish flipped inside out so that their organs slithered and jiggled beside them.

Once, he had found Balzac at the oasis lakes, alone, his bony, frail body naked from a midnight swim, skin flushed blue with cold. Balzac's smile of greeting had suddenly shifted to doubt when Jeffer told him the news; and then Jeffer could see the darkness invading his brother, that luminous, expressive face blank with self-annihilation.

The images, the content, of the memory maintained a blurry constancy, across a dozen years, so that Jeffer could always conjure up the pale blue gloss of Balzac's face, lit from within, and the awful curling of his lips, through which he sucked air as if he were a deep lake fish, slow and lethargic in the cold, dying out of water.

What had he told Balzac at the time? The exact words had been erased from his memory; they lingered only as ghosts and he knew them only by their absence, the holes they left behind. The event itself he remembered with perfect clarity. He had been in a service tunnel with his parents, all three struggling to fix a clogged wastewater conduit sensitively located next to a main support beam. Polluted water streamed onto the tunnel floor. They all knew the dangers of compression, how that stream could become a flood. The portable light they'd brought with them flickered an intense green, staining the white tunnel walls as they toiled silently. The air, recycled too many times, tasted stale. Above them groaned the weight of five underground levels, enough rock, sand and metal to bury them forever.

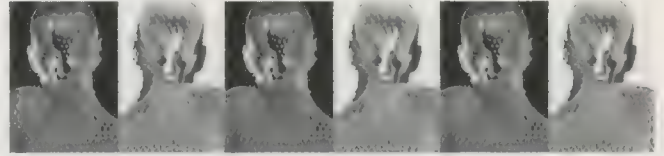
When it began to look as if the patch on the conduit would hold, Jeffer took a break, turning away to sip from a water canteen. He was sweaty and covered with grit. He faced the blinking red light that beckoned from the exit

and wondered idly whether there would still be time to get in a quick drink or a game of cards before night shift.

Behind him, like a door slamming shut, the supporting wall collapsed. Deafened, he heard nothing, *felt* the weight of sand and rock suddenly smother the tunnel.

He knew. Before he spun around. His parents were dead.

The foreknowledge strangled the scream rising in his throat, sent it imploding into his capillaries.



KILL THE MESSENGER, JEFFER THOUGHT. THEN
maybe the message will die too.

Seeing Jamie on the street below, Jeffer knew of no way to protect his brother from the image of her.

It was two hours before dawn, and as Jeffer stood on the third storey balcony the wind blew out of the southwest, cold and oddly comforting against his face. He hadn't showered or shaved for three weeks and there were holes in both his shoes. Sleep had become a memory, no more or less diaphanous than all the other memories, which crept in when he wasn't on his guard, because there was too much time to think.

Also from the southwest came the smell of gunpowder and the acidic stench of flesh burned by laser. Gouts of flame revealed dirigibles on fire, their barrel bodies crackling like rotten, orange melons. There, amid the fiercest fighting, the creche leaders had decided to use most of their remaining laser weapons. Spikes of light cut through the jumbled horizon of rooftops. The enemy hated light. It could not use light. Every spike of light extinguished was a human life snuffed out.

Jeffer's men, sequestered inside the building, numbered four. He could no longer lie to himself and call them a unit, or pretend they had any mission other than survival. Sixteen men had been killed in less than three nights. Of the rest, Con Fegman, wounded, had become delirious; Mindle counted as no more than a dangerous child; and Balzac... Balzac he could no longer read, for his brother hid beneath his handsome features and revealed himself to no one. Even their sole remaining autodoc — a portable, two-meter-high model with wheels and treads — had become increasingly eccentric, as if, deep in its circuitry, it had succumbed to battle fatigue.

Their predicament had become so dire that Jeffer found himself giggling at the most unexpected times. For over two hundred hours they had been cut off from communications with their superiors. The four of them had fought and fled from the enemy through tunnels, aqueducts, the ruins of old homes, and across the cracked asphalt of a thirty-six lane highway.

Through it all — the deadly lulls and the frenzies of violence — Jeffer had survived by fashioning a new identity for himself and his brother: they were refugees fleeing the past, and their best strategy had proved to be the simplest: in the unraveling of their lives to forget, to disremember, to exist purely in the *now*. They had successfully eluded

the past for two nights running and yet, somehow, she had found them again.

The war had extended into the heart of the desert winter, the buildings that crowded the street etched in sharp, defining lines by the cold. But how to define her? She walked in the shadow of her own skin, lit by the intermittent flash of laser fire. Was she human? She loped along the chill pavement of the street below, nimble and dainty and muscular as she navigated the long-abandoned barricades.

Jeffer stared, his body stiff. His breath caught in his throat. Centuries slow, he picked up his rifle from the balcony railing.

"Who is it?" Balzac's tired voice, muffled, came from the room at Jeffer's back. They had barricaded themselves in and had booby-trapped the stairwells. Inside the room, the autodoc produced a thin, blue-tinted light that couldn't be seen from the street.

The pale, moon-faced boy Mindle, a refugee from a northern creche already destroyed by the invaders, sidled along the wall until he was close enough to whisper, "Is it her again?" Mindle's voice held no fear, no surprise. Only Mindle's body registered such nerve end pricklings; at his spiritual core he had been frozen solid for a hundred years. Jeffer had seen too many like him in recent months as the creche sent younger and younger men into battle.

"Keep Balzac quiet," Jeffer whispered back. "If she hears him... Get Con Fegman, if he's able, to watch the door."

Mindle nodded and, wraithlike, disappeared into the darkness.

Below, Jamie began to cry out Balzac's name in the plaintive timbre of one who is lost and alone and afraid.

Balzac muttered a few words and Jeffer heard Mindle's soft voice, calm and reasonable, coo a soothing reply.

The shape on the street below stiffened, sneezed, and said, "Balzac, my love?"

Balzac's voice in reply: "Is it — could it?"

Mindle cursed. Jeffer heard a scuffle, a strangled cry, and silence, his gaze never straying from her. Lost and afraid. How could he ever consider her someone he had known? The sounds of her aloneness, her confusion, struck him as faintly pitiable, that she should, in any manner, try to recreate her former life. Such a curious double image: to see her on the street below and yet to remember all the times when Balzac had invited him over for dinner, Balzac and Jamie both exhausted from twelve hours of overseeing their reclamation projects in Balthakazar. She had never seemed vulnerable while arguing with him over the Con's latest decisions or about how to adapt the hydroponics hangars to open-air conditions. The lack of hardness in her now, the weaning away of any but the most dependent attributes, made him wary.

The stone wall behind him bruised his back. He didn't play the statue very well; he was sweating despite the cold and he imagined his breath as a vast, unmoving field of ice particles. Perhaps, as on the two previous nights, she would miss them, would pass by, rasping out her song.

Jeffer raised his rifle to his shoulder. *Pass by*, he wished desperately. *Pass by and be gone*.

He did not want to risk the sound of a shot. Come dawn, they would move else-where, maybe come across another

unit and cobble up enough numbers to mount a counter offensive.

Pass by. Even better, remake history. Let Balzac come to me swimming at night at the oasis. Let Balzac tell me of our parents' death. Let him be the eldest and follow me to Balthakazar.

She stopped directly beneath his balcony, at an extreme line of fire. She sniffed the air. She growled deep in her throat. "Balzac, are you there?" Such a reedy, ghostly voice.

She paced in a circle, still sniffing.

Jeffer allowed himself to be seduced by the fluid grace, the single-minded purpose behind the strides, the preternatural balance, for she was still beautiful.

She stopped pacing. She stared right up at him with her dead violet eyes, the snarl of fangs below the mouth.

"Jeffer," she said.

His finger closed on the trigger. The red tracer light lit up the pavement. The bullet hit the pavement, sent up a rain of debris.

But she was not there.

He could already hear her — *inside* the building. Battling through their booby traps. Barricades ripped apart, flung to the side.

"She's coming up!" Jeffer shouted, running back into the room. "She's coming up!"

Mindle and Con Fegman stood against the wall farthest from the door. Balzac sobbed, curled in a corner, guarded by the autodoc. It was clear Mindle had propped Con Fegman up and that the old man would fall down given the opportunity. Which left Mindle and himself to stop her. Mindle had their last two laser weapons, a rifle and a hand-held beam. He aimed the rifle at the door. They both knew it had only two or three more charges left.

"Give me the rifle," Jeffer said. "Keep the other one — a cross fire."

Mindle nodded, threw the weapon to him. Jeffer caught it. His heart pounded. His hands shook. He flicked the safety.

Mindle said, "Soon now. Soon now." He rocked back and forth on his heels. His eyes were dilated. He licked his lips.

They heard the scrabble of claws upon the stairs. Heard the rasping of her breath.

The terror left Jeffer in that instant, as if he had become as cold as Mindle. He wanted her to come through that door. He wanted to kill her.

The sound of claws faded. Silence settled over the room. Jeffer looked at Mindle in puzzlement.

Mindle smiled and winked. "Just wait. Just wait."

Then she hit the door with such force that the metal shrieked with fatigue.

"Balzac! Open the door!"

Another blow to the door. An indentation the size of her paw. A growl that would have ripped up Jeffer's insides a minute before.

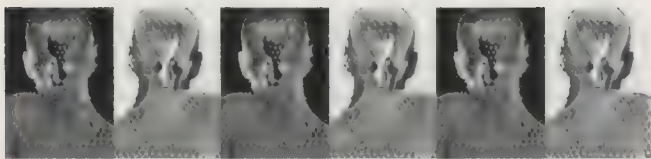
"Go away," yelled Con Fegman, who fell, thrashing, in the fever haze of his infection.

"Balzac! Open the door!"

Balzac looked up from his corner. Jeffer could see the anguish in his eyes.

"Don't," Jeffer said.

The door tore open as if it were paper.



METAL AND STONE EXPLODED INTO THE ROOM.

Jeffer was yelling but Balzac couldn't hear the words. She stood there — huge, black, half-seen in the autodoc's blue glare. She shook herself, debris fluming out from her body. Mindle dove into Balzac's corner and caught him in the ribs with an elbow. It drove the air out of Balzac's lungs. Before he could get to his feet — to warn her? to protect Jeffer? — she leapt at Jeffer. Jeffer's laser rifle flashed and burned her hindquarters off. His lover screamed and, trajectory altered, landed in a bloody, crumpled heap beside him, brought to a stop by the wall.

The body thrashed, the claws whipping out from the pistoning legs. Balzac ducked, covering his head with his hands. Con Fegman, struggling to his feet, was ripped by a claw and sent reeling by the impact. The front legs sought traction, flailed, and the great jaws beneath Jamie's head gnashed together, opening reflexively only inches from Balzac's throat. Fangs the size of fingers. Breath like an antiseptic wind. Blood splattered over the blunt muzzle. He could see the tiny pink tongue muscles tensing and untensing spasmodically.

Jeffer shouted an order to the autodoc. It lurched over on its treads, extended a tube, and stuck a needle into what remained of the flesh dog's left flank. The flailing died away. The great jaws lost their rigidity and rested against the floor. Blood seeped out from beneath the body, licking at Balzac's drawn up feet. Con Fegman moaned.

Balzac sat up against the wall, unable to look at his beloved. An endless sing-song ran through his head: if only, if only. If only Jeffer had let him talk to her while she was still on the street, perhaps he could have persuaded her to go away — and perhaps he didn't want her to go away. He let out a deep, shuddering sigh and stood on trembling legs.

Mindle blocked his path, so close he could smell the boy's rotten breath.

"Kill it," Mindle hissed, his face white with hatred. "Kill it now!"

Mindle's eyes had narrowed to knife points. Balzac looked away — toward Jeffer, toward Con Fegman.

Con Fegman, in a misty, far away voice, said, "I can't see anymore. I can't bear to see anymore," and covered his eyes and began to weep.

Balzac pushed past Mindle, turning his shoulder into the boy so he stumbled backwards. He went over to Con Fegman and knelt beside him, looked into his ancient face. Such sadness, such shame, that one of the creche's elders should be dying here, like this.

Balzac took one of Con Fegman's hands, held it tightly in his own.

Con Fegman grinned with broken teeth and said, "I need water. I'm so thirsty."

"I'll get you water. Autodoc — Con Fegman. Full medical."

Balzac stood and allowed the autodoc to do its job. It injected tranquilizers, enveloped Con Fegman in a sterile white shield and, away from meddling eyes, went to work on him.

"Don't waste ammunition," Jeffer said. "It's dying anyhow. It can't hurt us."

"No, she can't hurt us," Balzac said.

Mindle's hand wavered on his laser. Balzac stared at him until he lowered it.

"Jeffer," Balzac said. "Please, get him out of here. The traps. Have him redo the traps."

"I'm here," Mindle said. "I'm in the room."

Mindle's hot gaze bore down on him, and he tensed, prepared to defend himself should Mindle decide to turn against them.

Jeffer nodded to Mindle. "Go downstairs and fix the barricades. Put up more traps. I'll keep watch on the balcony. At dawn, we move out."

"And will we take that thing with us?" Mindle asked, in a voice sweet as poison.

"No," Jeffer said and stared pointedly at Balzac. "I promise you we won't take her with us."

"Compassion!" Mindle spat, but he headed for the door.

Balzac watched him — a man-child, both ancient and newly-born, gaunt but innocent of hunger. Balzac couldn't blame him for his rage, or for the madness that came with it. He could only fear the boy. He had always feared the boy, ever since he had come to the creche: an albino with frazzled, burnt white hair sticking up at odd angles, and eyes that made Balzac want to recoil from and embrace Mindle all at once. The eyes hardly ever blinked, and even when he talked to you, he was staring through you, to a place far away. Mindle had scoffed at their reclamation project, had not seen the point in the face of war. Why did they persist when they knew what they knew? Perhaps, Balzac thought, they had simply refused to believe in the proof Mindle brought with him.

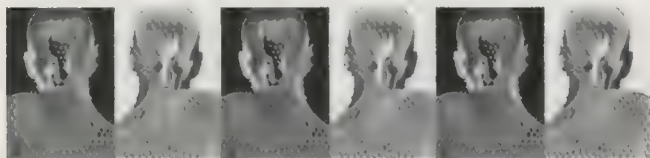
It had been Mindle, a refugee from the north, who had articulated the growing unease of the Con members — the first to put a name and a face to the enemy. Before him, there had only been disturbing phenomenon: strange, ungainly creatures lurking at the edge of campfire and oasis; dismembered human corpses not of the creche; then little gobbets of divorced flesh with cyclopean eyes that twitched like epileptic rats as they walked and, when dissected, proved to be organic cameras, *click-click-clicking* pictures with each blink of the single liquid blue eye.

Mindle had brought them a present, unwrapping the corpse of one of the enemy at a Con meeting. It was the only body yet recovered, badly burned and curled up into a fetal position like a dead black cricket, but still recognizably mammalian. Weasel-like. Two meters tall. Fangs snarling out from the partially-peeled back muzzle.

"At first, they walked around in plain view, directing their troops," Mindle had told the Con members. "Darting here and there, sometimes on four legs, sometimes on two legs. A meerkat hybrid, no doubt a left over from biotech experiments before the Collapse, with a much

bigger skull and an opposable thumb. *Made* creatures. When we captured this one, they went into hiding, and now they only send their servants, the flesh dogs..."

Watching the grimace of Mindle's features, the hatred embedded there, Balzac had felt a prickle of unease, as if Mindle were not the messenger, but the presence of death itself.



WITH MINDLE GONE, BALZAC TURNED TO JAMIE, her face set like a jewel in a ring, nearly buried by the folds of tissue on the flesh dog's head. Clinically, he forced himself to recall the little he knew about such symbiosis: Jamie's head had been cut from her body and placed in the cavity usually reserved for the flesh dog's nutrient sac; the nutrient sac allowed the beast to run for days without food or water. Her brain stem had been hardwired into the flesh dog's nervous system and bloodstream, but motor functions remained under the flesh dog's control. She could not shut her eyes without the flesh dog's approval, and although she kept her own eyes, they had been surgically enhanced for night vision, so that now her pupils resembled tiny dead violets. Sometimes the wiring went wrong and the symbiote would fight for muscle control with the flesh dog — a condition that ended with uncontrollable thrashing and a slow death by self-disembowelment.

Jeffer stumbled over a chair and Balzac became aware that his brother still shared the room with him.

"Why don't you leave, too," Balzac said, anger rising inside him.

"You shouldn't be alone. And what if there were others? I need to watch from the balcony."

"There's no one with her."

"I'm staying. You'll hardly know I'm here."

Balzac waited until Jeffer had stepped out to the balcony. Then, thoughts a jumble of love and loathing, he forced himself to stare at his lover's face. The face registered shock in the dim light, stunned as it began to recover itself. As he watched, the eyes, pupils stained purple, blinked rapidly, the full mouth forming a puzzled smile. Balzac shuddered. She looked enough like the Jamie he remembered for love to win out over loathing. He had known it would; deep down, in places he would never reveal to anyone, he had hoped Jamie would track him here. He had assumed that once she had found him again he could bring her back from the dead.

Looking at her now, he had no idea what to do.

"Balzac? Balzac?" That voice, no longer strong, demanding and sexy.

He was so used to her being the stronger one, the one who had an answer for everything, that he couldn't reply. He couldn't even look at her. Throat tight and dry, legs wobbly, he took a step toward Jeffer. Jeffer was only a silhouette, behind which rose the night: a ridge of black broken by faint streaks of laser fire.

"Help me, Jeffer."

"I can't help you."

"What should I do?"

"I would have shot her in the street."

"But you didn't."

"I didn't."

"Balzac," Jamie said. The disorientation in her voice frightened Balzac. He ground his teeth together to stop his tears.

"She can still hurt you," Jeffer said.

"I know," Balzac said. He slumped down against the wall, his shoes almost touching Jamie's head. The floor was strewn with dirt, pieces of stone, and empty autodoc syringes. Beside Balzac, the flesh dog's entrails congealed in a sloppy pile.

"Balzac?" Jamie said a third time.

Her eyes blinked once, twice, a miracle for one who had been dead. She focused on him, the flesh dog's head moving with a crackly sound.

"I can see you," she said. "I can really see you."

You're dead, he wanted to say, as if it were her fault. *Why aren't you dead?*

"Do you know where you are?" Balzac asked. "Do you know who you are?"

"I'm with you," she said. "I'm here, and it's cold here."

The effort too much, too soon, with the flesh dying all around her, Jamie's eyes closed to slits.

Balzac wondered if what he saw was not just a carnie trick, if beneath the flesh lived nothing more than a endless spliced loop, a circuit that said his name and tried to seduce him with the lie that Jamie lived, long enough for it to drive him mad. Jamie had died. He knew that; if he saw her now, she was ghost cloaked in flesh, as dead as the city of powdering bones. The same war that had given the city a false heart — a burning, soul-consuming furnace of a heart — had resurrected Jamie. Yet he must assume that she was more than a shadowy wisp of memory, because he could not prove her ghostliness, her *otherness*. What cruelty for him to abandon her should she be aware. And trapped.

Jamie had died on the front lines a week before, *then* and *now* separated by a second and a century. His recollections were filtered through a veil of smoke and screams, the dark pulsating with frantic commands. Particular moments stood out: the irritation of sand grit in his shoes; a lone blade of grass caught *just so* between yellow and green; an ant crawling across an empty boot, its red body translucent in the laser glow; the reflection of an explosion, the burnt umber flames melting across the muzzle of his rifle; the slick feel of Jamie's grime-smeared hand in his, her pulse beating against him through the tips of her fingers.

Crowded together in long trenches, they had been only two among several thousand, waiting. They did not talk, but only touched, not trusting words.

The flesh dogs appeared promptly at twilight, bringing silence with them in a black wave. They wore the masks of friends, the guise of family. They jogged and cantered across the fires: fueled by a singleness of purpose, pounding on shadow muscles, ripping swathes of darkness from the night so as to reimagine themselves in night's image. Eyes like tiny dead violets. An almost-silent ballet of death.

Then, on cue, they halted, forming a solid, uniform line. They stood so still it would have been easy to think

they were a row of ancient statues built on the order of a brilliantly deranged despot.

In the lull, Balzac hugged Jamie one last time, taking comfort in the way time became timeless in the embrace of her body.

Above, dirigibles coughed and grunted with the effort of discharging missiles, flashes of light catching ground combatants in freeze frame.

As the flesh dogs came into range, in such numbers that the ground reverberated with the thunder of their passage, the defenders of the trench opened fire: the spitting sparks of lasers and the rhythmic *phutt-phutt* of rifles entwined in an orgasm of recoil and recharge. It took immense discipline to stand in the teeth of such a charge. The rifle in Balzac's hands seemed heavy, difficult — it wanted its head, and in the heat of battle it was all he could do to keep it aimed and firing, his finger awkward on the trigger.

In reply to the defenders' barrage: a chorus of bone-thin voices attached to alien bodies, a thousand ghosts wailing across the ruins in the timbre of old friends pleading for their lives, calling out to the living by name.

It brought madness bubbling to the surface, so that the defenders shot and recharged with incredible speed, shouting back their own hatred to block out the voices, obliterating the present that it might not obliterate the past.

As the wave broke over them, the tableau dissolved in confusion. Mostly, Balzac remembered the stench of gunpowder as he loaded and reloaded — but more slowly now, mesmerized by the carnage — and the fleeting images through the smoke... Huge bodies flung without reason or care... a dark blue-black wall of flesh... the swiftness of them, almost as fast as a dirigible, so that a blink could cost a life... Sinuous muscles, caricatures of human faces as wincing passengers... The bright black slickness of spilled oil... Throats ripped from bodies... bodies fallen, whirling and dancing in the jaws of the flesh dogs... flesh dogs toppling, sawed in half or legs cut off, crawling forward... others, shot in the head, falling over on their backs.

Through the black-white-black of dirigible flashes, Balzac saw Jamie fall in stop-gap motion *and his heart stopped beating* away from him into the darkness *he couldn't see her anywhere*. As he put out his hand to pull her up, she was no longer there.

"Jamie!"

A flesh dog galloped toward the breach in the line left by Jamie's absence. He spun, shot it, and jumped to the side, the fangs snapping inches from his throat. It slammed into the trench, dead. He got up... and when he looked back toward the gap in the line of defenders, she still hadn't filled it, hadn't regained her feet as he'd expected, even when the dirigibles scorched the night into day.

In his panic, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think.

"Jamie!" he shouted over the screams and detonations. "Jamie!"

And the echo passed along the line to him: "Retreat! Fall back! Breached! Breached!"

A death sentence for Jamie. A section of the trench had been overrun and to avoid being flanked they must fall back. The retreat, a haphazard, broken-backed affair, piled

confusion on confusion, some soldiers running away while others commenced a vigilant rearguard action to allow stragglers to cross back over what was now enemy territory.

A dirigible exploded directly overhead, the impact knocking Balzac to the ground. Swathes of burning canvas floated down on the combatants. Molten puddles crackled and hissed around Balzac as he got up. Mechanically, he haunted the burning ground, searching for his beloved with his infrared goggles. He dove into ditches, crawled through the most dangerous of fire fights, lending his rifle only long enough to clear a path to the next embattled outpost. Each minute of failure added to the heaviness in his chest, the rising sense of helplessness.

Later, he would recall the black-and-red battlefield as if he had been aboard a dirigible; he would even remember watching himself run across the treacherous ground: a tiny figure leaping recklessly between trenches, scurrying through flames without hesitation. Other times, he would remember it only as a series of starts and stops. He would be running and then fellow soldiers or flesh dogs would be all around him like a sudden rain, and then he would be alone again, his thoughts poisoning his skull.

Only the sight of the creature saved Balzac from the endless searching, for it was only then that he realized Jamie must be dead.

He sat down heavily, as if shot, and stared at it as it bustled about its business some thirty-five meters away. It was so sleek and functional and not of this world — so much more *perfect* than anything perfect could be — that for a moment Balzac could not imagine its function: it was merely a beautiful piece of artwork, a thing to be admired for its own clockwork self. How could humankind compete with such a creature? He watched it with mounting dread and guilty fascination.

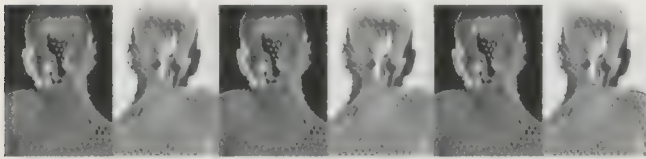
It scuttled along on cilia-like feet, almost centipedal, and yet it was clothed in dense, dark fur — long and low to the ground so that it seemed to *flow*, a species composed of the most elemental combination of flesh and bone. The head, which swivelled three hundred sixty degrees, reminded Balzac of a cross between cat and badger, the bright, luminous eyes and curious smile of muzzle conspiring to make the beast almost jolly. Thin, Balzac thought at first. Thinner than thin, the spine caved in on itself so that its back appeared to have been scooped out with a shovel, leaving a long, low compartment walled in by shoulders and flanks. The smooth-squishy sound it made with its thousand limbs he had heard before, on the battlefield, as a low, underlying counterpoint to the screams and explosions.

But although the beast stunned him with its perfect strangeness, the function it performed stunned him more.

As he watched, the beast threaded its way through the scattered corpses. Finally, at the body of a young man with open, vacant eyes, and a thin line of blood trickling from the mouth, the beast came to a halt. Then, with a discernable 'pop', spinning wildly, the expression on its face insanely cheerful, the beast's head unscrewed itself from its body and, with the aid of cilia positioned beneath its now autonomous head, lifted itself over the edge of its own shoulders. Once it had sidled up to the head of its

victim, the beast grunted twice and two appendages emerged from the thick fur: a powerful blade of bone and a two-thumbed hand. The blade came down, slicing through the man's neck. Almost simultaneously, the hand grasped the dead soldier's head and placed it over the hole left by the departure of the beast's head. It waited for a moment, then pulled the man's head, which had been 'capped' with a pulsing purple slab of flesh, back out of the hole. Balzac watched with horrified fascination as the hand then tossed the capped head into the scooped out cavity of the beast's body. Both blade and hand disappeared into the beast's grinning head, which then rolled and huffed its way back onto its own neck and twirled twice, before the whole nightmare contraption scuttled on, out of sight.

Leaving Balzac alone, with the dead.



AFTER THE BATTLE, BEHIND THE LINES, THEY PUT him in Jeffer's guerilla unit. Jeffer would watch over him as he always had in the past.

Jeffer placed his hand on Balzac's shoulder. Balzac flinched and Jeffer realized that the gesture was unappreciated, but he tried by an act of will to put all of his love and fear for Balzac into that simple touch of hand on shoulder. Love. He might not have admitted to love a few years ago, beyond the love expected by blood, but Jeffer had seen an unlikely transformation come over Balzac.

Balzac had always been handsome, to the point of callowness, with piercing green eyes and a firm chin. But slowly, as he and Jamie became closer, and especially in the year after their marriage, Jeffer had seen the callowness stripped away. A certain *weight* and *depth* had entered the perfect lines of his brother's mouth, a seriousness and mischievousness which illuminated the eyes. It was as if a fear had conquered Balzac simultaneous with his love for Jamie — fear for the death of his beloved, that their love could not last forever — and that these entangled twins of fear and love had peeled away the callousness like a moulting lizard skin.

Jamie had remarked on it during a tour of the Balthakazar reclamation projects, as they sat and watched Balzac out in the sun, badgering the engineers.

"I don't know if I would still love him," she said. "Not if he was just handsome. I used to love him for his mouth and his eyes and his awkwardness, and I wanted to protect him." She flashed the smile that had driven dozens of men to despair. "Now he's grown up and become real."

The memory haunted Jeffer as he said to Balzac, "It will be okay. You don't have to do anything. It won't be long..." Jeffer suddenly felt weary. Why must he comfort others at those times he most needed comfort? The muscles in his throat tightened. Ever since he had been left with an eleven-year-old boy who could never again quite be just his little brother it had been this way.

"I should have rolled in the dirt and disguised my scent," Balzac said. "I should have become someone else. Then

she couldn't have found me. Ever. I shouldn't have let her find me. *But where's the kindness in that?*"

Jeffer smiled at the mimicry of Mindle's favourite phrase.

"Kindness?" Mindle said, surprising them both. Eyes bright and reptilian, he stood in the doorway. "Kindness? How can you speak of kindness? There's no room for it. We've no need of it."

Jeffer half expected Mindle to crouch down and lap up the blood pooling around the flesh dog's body. Who could predict the actions of a child who had never been a child?

"Are you finished with the barricades, Mindle?" Jeffer asked.

"With the barricades? Yes."

"Then wait outside until dawn. Stand watch from the second storey window."

Mindle stepped inside the room. He licked his lips. "Yes, sir. But first I thought we might interrogate the prisoner."

"The prisoner will be dead soon."

"Then we must be quick — quicker, even," he said, and took another step into the room.

"Take up your post on the second floor," Jeffer ordered.

Mindle took a third step into the room.

Before Jeffer could react, Balzac snatched up Con Fegman's rifle from the floor. He aimed it at Mindle.

Balzac said: "Go. Away."

Mindle smiled sweetly and turned to Jeffer, one eyebrow raised.

"Do as he says, Mindle," Jeffer said. "And, Balzac — put down the rifle!"

Mindle shrugged and turned away.

Balzac tossed the weapon aside and hunkered over the flesh dog's body. His brother's gauntness, the way the autodoc's light seemed to shine through him, unnerved Jeffer. Such an odd tableau: his brother crouched with such love and such gentleness over the massive body of the flesh dog, as if it were his own creation.

Jeffer tottered forward under the spell of that image, his intentions masked even from himself, but Balzac waved him away.

"Please, let me be," Balzac said. "Watch the window. Watch Mindle."

Even as he nodded yes, Jeffer hesitated, wondering for the first time if he could aim a rifle at his own brother. He walked over to the balcony and watched Balzac and Jamie from the darkness. Jamie's face was pale, her lips grey. The beast's flesh surrounded her like a rubbery cowl.

He marvelled at the affection in Balzac's voice as his brother touched the creature's face and asked, "How do you feel?"

"Cold. Very cold. I can't feel my legs. I think I'm dying. I think I'm already dead, Balzac. Why else should I feel so cold?"

Balzac flinched and Jeffer thought: *Think? Feel? Can it do either?*

"It's a cold night," Balzac told her. "You need a blanket. I wish I had a blanket for you, my love."

"Cold. Very cold," she said, in a dreamy, far-off voice.

"I'll find something for you," Balzac said, his voice cracking with grief. "Jeffer, I'm going to look through the supplies downstairs — maybe there's a blanket. Watch her for me?"

"She's almost...I mean, I don't think we have a blanket."

"I know! I know that. Just watch her."

Balzac scabbled to his feet and fled through the ruined doorway, leaving Jeffer with the enemy. As he circled her, he wondered if he should kill her.

"Who is there?" Jamie said. "Are you cold too?"

At the sound of that voice, Jeffer stepped away from her, made sure she couldn't see him. What if she recognized him? What if she spoke his name again? What then?

In the corner, Con Fegman stirred and said, in a sing song voice, "The sand toad told the sand itself and the sand told the toads and the toads told the sand and...and...and..." He faded back into unconsciousness, the myth trapped between his withered lips.

Jeffer tried to ignore Con Fegman. He had so resigned himself to the old man's death that he sometimes started in surprise during Con Fegman's moments of lucidity, as if a ghost had drawn breath.

"I want to get up," Jamie said, face tightening as she strained to move the flesh dog's leg muscles. "I can't seem to get up."

Jeffer knew better than to interrogate her. If he couldn't shoot her, he would have to content himself with watching her.

In the early days, before the full-fledged invasion, he had volunteered to help capture and interrogate such surgically-altered specimens. They never had much to say and, anyhow, who could tell if what the prisoners said was authentic or preprogrammed? The heads when separated from the bodies would live on unimpaired for two or three hours, and perhaps there was a hint of miracles in this delayed mortality, but surely nothing more.

Locklin, the subject of Jeffer's final interrogation, had believed in miracles, and as Jeffer stared at Jamie he could not help but see Locklin's face superimposed over hers.

Locklin had laughed at him even during those moments of the interrogation that most resembled torture. When asked a question, the creature would say its name and make a low bubbling laugh through its flesh dog and human mouths. The violet eyes would widen, his craggy, heavily-tanned and scarred face sprawled across the flesh dog's forehead. "I am Locklin today, but tomorrow? You will all be me."

Locklin claimed to come from a creche located in the far north, nestled against a frozen sea. Cliffs four hundred meters high sheltered them from the arctic winds, and from these same cliffs came the enemy, in great numbers, on a winter's day when many of the creche were dying from cold; the heaters had failed and the creche's leadership had wavered on whether to wait out the weather or to abandon the creche.

"But the m'kat," Locklin offered near the end, contempt for Jeffer poisoning his voice, "they fixed us up! Ho! They surely did. Immortality in return for service — a fine, fine body that will run forever, and we said yes! We said yes, all of us shivering in that frozen place...as most of you will say yes in your turn."

Always it was flesh dogs fashioned from members of this particular creche that Jeffer found least like a poorly animated holovid. If some responded like sand through a

sieve to his questioning, then these hardened types were steel traps. For they had not just pledged allegiance to the "m'kat" but worshipped them; giving up their children to immortality and abandoning their old religions. This betrayal of species terrified Jeffer. Among the Con members it was the greatest of all fears: to be captured by an enemy that did not know mercy as humans knew it, an enemy unparalleled in the art of psychological warfare. To be sent back in the guise of a flesh dog, mouthing your own name or the name of your beloved as the creature fought you.

Only now did Jeffer realize he had talked to Locklin too much, for as he watched Jamie, Locklin's hypnotic words drifted in and out of his thoughts: "*You could live forever this way, if you would only submit...*" A great sadness welled up inside Jeffer, for he and his brother had become estranged; it was there in Balzac's words, in his face: that the love he had for Jamie had become monstrous, had taken him over and eaten him from the inside out. Did Balzac sense a truth to Locklin's words that escaped him? A chill crept into Jeffer's skin. He could already foresee an outcome monstrous beyond imagination and he told himself he would not help *in that way* — he could not — and he tried to convince himself this was because he loved his brother, not because he stood alone in the same room with a creature so familiar to him and yet so alien. Would Balzac ever forgive him?



MINDLE HAD BEEN BALZAC'S HATEFUL SHADOW

as he rummaged through their meager cache of supplies for a blanket. The boy had said nothing, had followed almost without sound, but Balzac could feel that gaze blasting the back of his head, scorching his scalp. He didn't mind; better to know where Mindle was than not. At times on his mini-quest, he even tried talking to Mindle, and took a perverse pleasure in his facade of cheeriness, knowing it must make the boy burn even brighter. Burn, then. Burn up.

But there was no blanket, and with each step back up the stairs, the facade faded a little more until he could barely walk for the weariness that pulled at him. On the third floor landing, Balzac heard Mindle's retreating footsteps and was glad of it, not wasting time with a taunt, but ducking into the room where Jamie still lay in the autodoc's blue light. Jeffer stood to one side.

"I couldn't find a blanket. You can go back to the window."

Jeffer gave Balzac a wan smile, but Balzac only slumped down beside Jamie.

"Jamie," he said when Jeffer had gone back out onto the balcony.

"I'm cold." A voice like an echo, rich with phlegm or blood.

"Cold like the oasis lakes — do you remember the oasis lakes?"

He thought he saw her mouth curl upward. She gave a little hiccuping laugh.



"I remember. I remember the cold. It makes me sneeze." Then, doubtful: "That was a long time ago..."

The water had been cold. They'd dived in together, into the hardness of the water, swum through it, their muscles aching. They'd snorted water, gurgled it, luxuriating in the decadence of so much water, and surfaced to kiss, breathlessly under the stars. Her lips had tasted of passion-fruit and he had pressed her into the shallows where they could stand, then moved away from her shyly, only to find her pulling him back toward her and putting his hand between her legs; making sharp, quiet sounds of pleasure as his hands moved lightly on her.

But, faced with her in the flesh, he could not hold onto the memory of the emotion. It dissipated into the grime and darkness: a dimly-glittering jewel against whose sharp edges he could only bleed.

"We made love there," he said.

Silence.

Dawn would come soon and they would have to move on while they had the chance.

Jamie whimpered and moaned and cried out in her half-death, half-sleep. He was cruel (wasn't he?) to prolong her pain.

He could feel Jeffer staring at him. If not Jeffer then Mindle. Mindle hated him. Jeffer loved him. But they both wanted the same thing.

Balzac let his gaze linger over Jamie's face, the thickness of it which had overtaken the grace, as if the architects that had put her back together could not quite recreate their source material. This was the woman who had worked side by side with him to rebuild the city, she planting trees as he excavated and drew plans. He had even grown to enjoy the planting — long hours, yes, and the work made his fingers bleed and blister but he had liked the smell of dirt, enjoyed the rhythms of the work and the comfort of her presence at his side.

He thought of the times he had made love to her on the cool desert sand under the stars, and how they would sneak back to the creche in the years before they were married, there to lie in bed for hours afterwards, talking or telling stories. The sweet smell of her, the taste of her tongue in his mouth, these were *real*, as was the peace that came over him when he was inside her, so very close to her, as close to her as he could, to be inside her and looking into her eyes.

He owed it to her. If he loved her.

In agony, he ran to the balcony, pushing Jeffer aside, and beat his fists against the stone railing.

"Listen to me: it's better this way," Jeffer whispered. "Come morning, there's a good chance we can come under the protection of a larger unit. If we can only survive—"

"Shut up!" Balzac hissed. "Shut up or I'll yell and *they'll* all hear us."

"Should I leave?"

"Leave? No...but I don't want to talk. I don't want to *think*... I just want to stand here for a moment."

"That's fine. That's fine. I'm your brother, Balzac, *your* brother. I don't want to hurt you."

Balzac tried to slow his breathing. He leaned on the railing and looked out across the city. Dawn soon, and

still the dirigibles burned and still the darkness closed in around them. A hundred shades of darkness for a hundred different tasks — darkness to cover buildings; darkness to cover pain; darkness to cover thoughts; darkness to cover the light, and the light, when it came, only emphasized the darkness all the more. He could no longer hear the faint, ghostly shouts from the front lines; the darkness had swallowed the voices, too.

For the first time, looking out over not only the ruined city but the ruins of his own ambition, Balzac felt the pull of that darkness, felt overpowered by it. He was tired. He was so tired. He began to weep. He could not bear it. He must bear it. He could not. He must.

Where into that darkness had she been taken? Where had the scuttling creature dragged her? Had it dragged her into the hole at the centre of the amphitheatre? Some place underground where the darkness grew thick and unfettered — in the tunnels under the city, wherever *they* had their headquarters, where the creatures from nightmare used to live before they were displaced by the enemy. It hurt to imagine such places. They scared him more than anything. All he could imagine was suffocating dirt, the tunnel imploding and burying him alive.

What sort of immortality had she found there? When they'd reawakened her, had she pleaded with them? Did she know, even now, exactly what had been done to her?

And if he took her back there, could they live together, in the darkness, all alone with only one another for company amongst the ghouls and ghosts...

"Help me to imagine it, Jeffer."

"Imagine what?"

"Never mind."

A red wound bled across the horizon. Balzac stared at Jeffer. Jeffer looked away.

"I know I have to do it," Balzac said.

"You don't. I'll do it for you."

"No. I have to do it."

"Then do it."

Balzac nodded and walked back to Jamie. He leaned over her, touched her face once again, smoothed back a strand of hair. Strange, the calm that settled over him.

"Balzac?" she said in such a questioning tone that he almost laughed with grief.

"Jamie. Jamie, I have to ask you something. Do you hurt, Jamie? Jamie, do you hurt a lot?"

"I'm so cold," she said. Then something clicked behind her eyes and he thought he saw the old confidence.

"Close your eyes then, Jamie. I swear, Jamie. This won't hurt, Jamie, it won't hurt. I wouldn't lie. Not to you, Jamie."

"I know, my love."

He exchanged weapons with Jeffer: his rifle for Jeffer's laser. Then, hugging the flesh dog's head to him, he adjusted the setting on the laser for a needle-thin, ten-centimeter-long blade. If he cut the throat, she might last for a few minutes, in pain. But if he could spear her through the head... His hand wavered and for a moment every atom, every particle, that made him Balzac streaked in opposite, splintered directions. If only she wouldn't stare at him...

His hand steadied, and with it his resolve. Two smooth strokes and he had separated the node of tissue that

contained Jamie. There was no blood; the laser cauterized the wound instantly. Her eyes still stared up at him though her lips did not move. He held her against him, closed her eyes, kept the rifle in his right hand, reactivated the normal settings.

When he looked up Jeffer was staring at him in horror.

Balzac's shoulders sagged, the weight of darkness too great, and then he righted himself, found his legs.

Jeffer took a step forward, as if to block the door.

"Don't. Don't do that," Balzac said.

"Balzac! Leave her be."

Tears blurred Balzac's vision; he wiped them away viciously with his forearm. Seconds were as precious as water now; he could not waste them.

"I can't do it, Jeffer. I. Just. Can't."

"You can! You know you can. You remember how I was after...after our parents died? You remember how I was? You brought me back. *You did that.* I can do that for you. I know I can."

"And if you do? I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear it. *I can't lose her too.*"

"It's too late. You'll lose her anyway."

"Not if I find them in time. I've got an hour. Two, maybe."

Silent as an executioner, Mindle appeared at the door, his hand-held laser aimed at Balzac.

"*Mindle, get out of here!*" Jeffer screamed, raising his own rifle. The barrel wavered between Balzac and Mindle.

Mindle's eyes had the fatal density of dead stars.

"Shut up, Jeffer," he said. "If he moves, I'll shoot him."

Into the deadly silence crept the first light of the sun. Grainy yellow rays revealed them all as tired, grime-smeared, gaunt figures frozen in time, while Con Fegman stared with sightless eyes directly into the sun. Balzac could hear his brother's muttered prayers, could sense the tension in Mindle's trigger finger. He looked first at one and then the other, their shadows flung against the far wall.

Looking down into her sleeping face, Balzac knew he was impervious to the other voices, the voices that were not hers. For her sake, he had to get past Mindle, make it to the doorway, and onto the street below. The odds were bad, and yet he felt at peace: the darkness was still with him, cloaking and protecting him.

Vaguely, he heard Jeffer tell him to put down his rifle and Mindle scream that if he took a single step he was a dead man, but their words came from very far away. They could not touch him — not Mindle, not his brother. No one but Jamie. The darkness covered his face like a veil. He caressed Jamie's cold cheek with one trembling hand.

"Goodbye," he said. He threw his rifle in Mindle's face. He ran toward the door. Behind him he heard Jeffer's slow, drawn-out shriek of loss, and then the ice-heat of Mindle's star exploded against his back. The force drove him forward, knocked the breath from his body, and he was falling through the doorway, falling into the darkness of the stairwell — and kept falling, a numbness enveloping his body, until the darkness was complete and it was no longer the stairwell but the black oasis lakes, and he was diving into and through them, the wet wave and wash licking blackly at his limbs, and just when he thought he might fall forever, he caught himself.

Sand, bright sand, beneath his feet, the grains like glittering jewels. He looked up — into the glare of late afternoon — and saw Jeffer staring down at him from the lip of the amphitheatre. Jamie saw Jeffer a moment later and gasped in surprise.

Jeffer stalked down to them, cold-shouldered and stiff, sand spraying out around his boots. Balzac had risen from his position near the beast, thinking Jeffer would give them both a thrashing.

But instead, Jeffer became very quiet and asked them if they were all right. Balzac said yes and Jamie asked how he had found them.

"The zynagill," Jeffer said, still staring at the beast. "I thought you might be dead."

Before Balzac could speak, Jamie laughed and said, "No. *It is.* What do you think of it?"

"I think you should get away from it." Jeffer walked closer.

"It came from underground," Balzac said.

"It came from far away," Jamie said. "Look at its paws."

"It's like something from the old books," Jeffer whispered, skirting the edge of the beast as if it were poison. "We should burn it."

"Burn it?" Balzac said. "But it's dead."

"Burn it," Jeffer said.

But it was too late. They heard a leathery, cracking sound and the flesh dog's bulbous forehead split open and out struggled a creature the size of a man's heart. It glistened with moisture and, seeming to grow larger, spread its blue-black wings over the ruins of the flesh. It had all the delicate and alien allure of a damselfly.

"It's beautiful," Jamie said.

The creature gazed at them from one red-ringed eye (luminous amber, with a vertical black slit). The bone-thin legs ended in razor claws. The wings rose and fell with its breathing, which was steady and unruffled. The wings were those of a fallen angel, miraculous in that the black, shiny surface reflected greens and purples and blues. They were monstrously oversized for the body and the beast flapped them to keep its balance.

Jeffer moved first, fumbling for his gun, and the creature, alarmed by the motion, moved its wings more vigorously.

Balzac put himself between Jamie and the creature, his swift embrace so tight she could not move, though she struggled against him.

Before Jeffer could aim, the creature launched itself into the air and spiralled up through the flock of hovering zynagill, scattering them in all directions. It made a swift pass over the amphitheatre, still gaining altitude, then veered abruptly toward the west and began to pick up speed, soon out of sight.

Jamie wrenched herself from his grasp. "Why did you do that?!"

"I didn't want it to hurt you."

"I don't need your help," she said, but when he looked into her eyes, he saw a sudden awareness of him that had not been there before. It sent a shiver through his body.

"What does it mean?" Balzac asked Jeffer, whose face was still clouded with thought.

"I don't know. We will have to tell the Con members."

"Where do you think it went?" Jamie asked.

"I think...I think it was a messenger. A beacon. I don't know."

"It was incredible," Jamie said.

The afternoon shadows so emphasized the brazen lines of her eyes, nose, cheekbones, that her image burned its way into Balzac's heart. He would have willingly lost himself in her, if only for the mystery he could not unravel — that her beauty was as luminous and sharp-edged as that of the winged creature. He experienced a rush of vertigo, fought for his balance on the edge of a darkly-glittering future that would bind her to him beyond any hope of untangling.

Then: falling again, willingly, in a surge of happiness, a laugh escaping his lips as he focused with contentment on the grand adventure of their lives together.



JEFFER AND MINDLE STOOD SIDE BY SIDE AT THE top of the stairs, looking down through the early morning gloom of dust motes. Mindle shook with spasms of tears, undoing all the savagery of his face. Below, on the landing, Balzac's body lay sprawled, a wide, black hole burned through his back. His hands were tightly clasped around the flame-distorted head of Jamie, whose lidless eyes stared sightless at them. Even in the shadows, Jeffer could see the thin, pale line of his brother's mouth fixed in a smile.

An emptiness Jeffer could not quantify or describe opened up inside of him. For a moment, he could not contain it, and he looked over at Mindle, intending to kill the boy should he discern even a trace of mockery upon that ancient face. But the tears had washed away the predatory sarcasm, the bloodlust, and he was almost vulnerable again, almost boyish again.

Jeffer slung the laser rifle over his shoulder and motioned to Mindle.

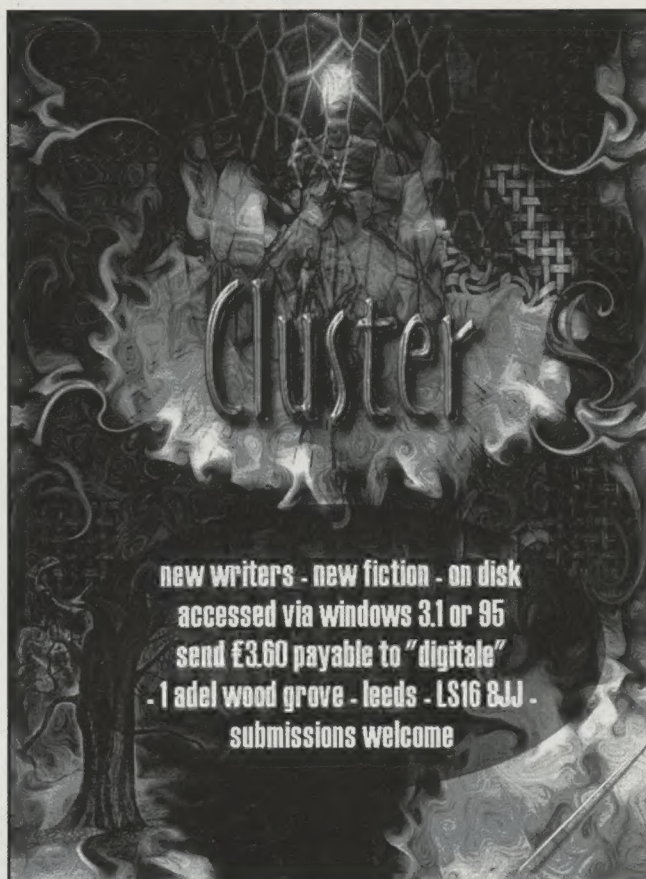
"Come on — if it's safe, we can bury them in the amphitheatre," he said.

Horror, yes, and pain, and sadness — and yet, this relief: it was over. It was finished. And this final thought, this joy, which overcame the guilt: *I'm alive. I survived it.*

Mindle looked disoriented for a moment, as if he had been dreaming or listening to a distant and terrible music. Then the mask slid back over his face and he sneered, muttered a hollow "Yes," and followed as Jeffer walked down the steps to the body of his brother, the sun warm on his back.

For Wade Tarzia — thanks

JEFF VANDERMEER has published many short stories in a wide variety of anthologies and magazines, as well as two very highly acclaimed books: *Dradin* — *in Love* and *The Book of Lost Places*. He recently founded The Ministry of Whimsy Press, publishing story collections, novels and the anthology series *Leviathan*. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida.



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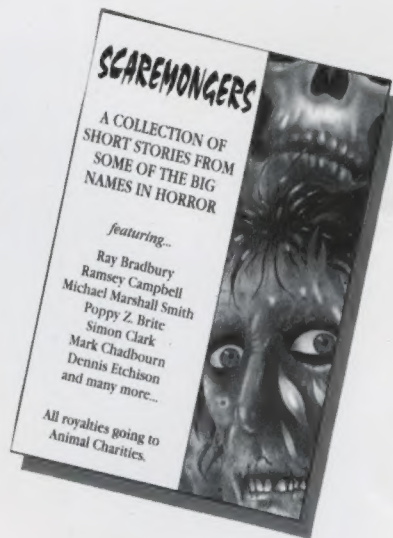
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